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## **Mother's concern now a quest ; Activism stirred by son's incarceration at Tamms; [Chicago Final Edition]**

*Margaret Littman, Special to the Tribune. Chicago Tribune. Chicago, Ill.: Oct 8, 2003. pg. 2*

### **Abstract (Summary)**

Among their concerns: Tamms prisoners have very little human contact. They are typically in solitary confinement 23 hours a day, seven days a week. Tamms does not have any rehabilitation programs. Prisoners are not allowed phone calls from family members, and visits must be cleared two weeks in advance and then conducted on microphones through glass while the inmates wear handcuffs. Allegations of abuse--strapping naked inmates to cots and feeding them "meal loafs" (mixes of a day's worth of food all in one) as punishment--are among the details cited in the suits.

**Full Text** (739 words)

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Pat Nelson is not trying to clear her son, Brian's, name. The third of her four children, Brian got involved with gangs when he was young. By 17, he was involved in a robbery and murder on the city's North Side. Brian, who wasn't the shooter, was sentenced in 1981 to 20 years in prison. While incarcerated, he climbed the wall and escaped. When he was caught hours later, 18 years were added to his sentence. Brian has been in 13 different prisons during his sentence. For years, his mother didn't visit him or even tell new friends that she had a son in prison. Even once she did start visiting him, she didn't think much about the different prisons or the way he was treated.

When he was transferred to Tamms Correctional Center, Illinois' only supermax prison, opened in 1998 for \$73 million, she thought it was "just another prison."

Located in Downstate Alexander County, it was designed to house the state's most problematic prisoners.

In the years Brian, now 39, has been in Tamms, Nelson has become convinced that Tamms is "evil. And evil is a strong word. But supermaxes are evil. It is against whatever god you believe."

Nelson says Brian has lost 54 pounds while incarcerated at Tamms (despite limited physical activity) and she is worried he is losing his sanity, too. That revelation has changed Nelson.

While Nelson believes Brian "needs to make a payment to society," she doesn't think it ought to be at Tamms. In fact, she doesn't think anyone ought to be at Tamms. "No matter what they did. No matter what anyone did, nobody should be stored in a nasty warehouse like they are."

A self-described middle-class mom, she has become an activist on behalf of not just Brian, but all of Tamms' 287 inmates.

It turns out that Nelson is not just a concerned mother. A number of Chicago-area groups, including the MacArthur Justice Center in Chicago, have filed lawsuits objecting to the mental and physical treatments of Tamms inmates.

Among their concerns: Tamms prisoners have very little human contact. They are typically in solitary confinement 23 hours a day, seven days a week. Tamms does not have any rehabilitation programs. Prisoners are not allowed phone calls from family members, and visits must be cleared two weeks in advance and then conducted on microphones through glass while the inmates wear handcuffs. Allegations of abuse--strapping naked inmates to cots and feeding them "meal loafs" (mixes of a day's worth of food all in one) as punishment--are among the details cited in the suits.

Nelson, a 60-year-old salesperson, talked to WomanNews about her cause.

Why the general public should care about what happens at Tamms: Brian and many of these inmates are not serving life sentences and could have serious difficulties readjusting to life beyond bars. If my son is released, he may live next to you. And you should be scared.

How becoming a Tamms activist has changed her: My whole life has been plain. [Now] I've done things I'd never done, talking to priests, putting out a newsletter. I get up at an ungodly hour to do things I never imagined I would do at my age. I'd rather be just an average person and not be doing this.

What role religion plays in her work: I am a divorced Catholic. But I've started attending church again. The way I see this is, God is chasing me and I am running away from Him. He wants me to do this. It does not make me holy. But I am one of the few people in the group [of inmates' families] who is capable verbally--because He has given me that gift--who has the time and the freedom and the knowledge available to call up people to help us.

On how she thinks about the future: I have four kids. I'm a mom. How many more years do I have [left] to be Brian's mom? Will I ever be able to make him a bowl of chicken soup? I am the sole person who has his interests at heart. So, I'm going to close the damn place. Brian and I are in Tamms together at this point.

#### **[Illustration]**

PHOTO; Caption: PHOTO: Pat Nelson, 60, says her son should pay his debt to society, but not at Tamms Correctional Center, which she calls "evil." Photo for the Tribune by Margo Cohn.

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