**Rasta inmates spend decade in isolation for dreadlock hair**

**By Dena Potter, The Associated Press**

JARRATT, Va. — Kendall Gibson would seem to be one of Virginia's most dangerous prisoners.

For more than 10 years he has lived in segregation at the Greensville Correctional Center, spending at least 23 hours every day in a cell the size of a gas station bathroom. In a temporary home for the worst of the worst inmates too violent or disruptive to live among the rest of society's outcasts he has been a permanent fixture.

He is there, he says, not for his crimes but for a crime he will not commit a crime against God.

The only thing imposing about Gibson is his long black dreadlocks, resting on the front of his shoulders so they won't drag the ground as he shuffles along in his orange jumpsuit.

It is his hair winding locks he considers a measure of his Rastafarian faith that makes him a threat, according to Virginia Department of Corrections Operating Procedure No. 864.1.

The rule took effect on Dec. 15, 1999. Inmates had two choices: cut their hair no longer than their collars and shave their beards, or be placed in administrative segregation.

In the beginning, Gibson was among as many as 40 inmates who opted for confinement over cutting. By 2003, when a handful of the inmates filed a federal lawsuit against the department over their detention, 23 remained in segregation.

The lawsuit failed. Some cracked under the pressure of constant isolation with no visits from loved ones, educational or religious programs or commissary. Some went home.

Today, it's difficult to tell exactly how many remain in isolation. The Department of Corrections won't volunteer the information, but has confirmed 10 names given to The Associated Press by a group of Rastafarian inmates.

Not everyone can handle it, Gibson says. For those weak in mind or spirit, the walls can easily close in on them.

"People always ask how I can smile in a place so negative," he says. The Rastafarian God, Jah, "is my answer. Without Jah in my life I wouldn't be able to handle it."

**Lifestyle, movement or religion?**

Like most of the Rastafarians in segregation, Gibson didn't become a believer until after he entered prison. He was 18 and had a long time to do, sentenced to 47 years on robbery, abduction and gun charges.

Gibson had always loved the "peaceful vibes of Rastafari livity," but like many he knew the movement by the hair, the music and the ganja. In prison, he met others who taught him the spiritual aspects. He took on the name Ras-Talawa Tafari, a strong leader who inspires awe.

**MARIJUANA:**[Rasta smoker wins case on religious grounds in Italy](http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2008-07-11-rastafarians-marijuana_N.htm)

Rastafari draws from the Bible, mixing in African and Caribbean cultural influences. It is considered by many more of a way of life or movement than a religion. They preach unity with god, nature and each other, but are loosely organized and followers are free to worship with other congregations.

Rastafarians regard Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie I, who was known as Ras Tafari before he rose to power in 1930, as the second coming of Christ. They believe Jah inhabits them so there is no real need for a church. They smoke marijuana as a sacrament and adhere to a vegetarian diet.

While some view growing their hair as optional, most Rastafarians see it as demanded by the Nazarite Vow in the Bible (Numbers 6:5), "There shall no razor come upon his head."

Gibson never entertained the thought of cutting his hair when the policy was announced or during the 10 long years since. "Jah didn't lead I to feel that this plight was burden enough to bow," he says.

A person must be willing to stand up and fight for a worthy cause, he says, echoing Rastafarian messenger [Bob Marley](http://content.usatoday.com/topics/topic/People/Celebrities/Musicians%2C%2BComposers%2C%2BSingers%2C%2BRappers%2C%2BGroups/Bob%2BMarley)'s rhythmic chant "Get up. Stand up. Stand up for your rights."

Gibson longs to hear such reggae music. A clear analog radio that picks up about nine stations is his only luxury in his small cell, but the island music doesn't get much air time in these parts.

His days are long but compact. Five days a week, he is led in restraints to an outside cage that resembles a dog kennel for an hour of recreation. Otherwise, he only leaves his 8-by-10 cell for three, 20-minute showers each week.

His cinderblock walls are off-white or gray, depending on the way the light hits them. The cell is freshly painted, drowning out the smell of his Dove soap resting on his one-piece sink-toilet unit.

If he stands on top of his mounted stainless steel bed Gibson can peak out the window, where he can see inmates in the general population recreation yard in the distance. He prefers to stare into the woods just beyond the razor-wife fence. On occasion he spies a deer grazing in the field.

The segregation unit has 16 cells, and although the inmates can't see each other they often talk. Gibson is amazed at what he calls their pure confusion and senseless babbling obsession with the lives of movie stars and rappers and sports figures.

And then there are the other Rastafarians. "These people may have my physical body confined, but I refuse to surrender my mind and spirit," says Allen McRae, also known as Ras-Solomon Tafari, who is serving 20 years for cocaine possession.

Elton Williams, who is behind bars for armed robbery, gets the question all the time from inmates pulling stints in segregation. Wouldn't it be easier just to cut his hair?

His answer: "My very soul depends on the decisions I make."

Williams, 31, likens it to a Christian who is told that, for security reasons, he must denounce Christ. Williams is set to leave prison in December; he could cut his hair until then, he says, but what would happen to his soul?

Then there was Ivan Sparks, a 59-year-old Rastafarian elder who refused to cut his hair and was sent into segregation at Buckingham Correctional Center.

He never left it except to die at Virginian Commonwealth University Medical Center last fall, of prostate cancer.

**The no hair policy**

The way Department of Corrections officials see it, the inmates could come out of segregation any time they wish.

They made a choice to go to segregation instead of cutting their hair, spokesman Larry Traylor says. Should they decide to comply with the grooming policy, they could return to general population.

"Rules must be in place in order to have a secure, safe environment for everyone," Traylor said. "An inmate that will not follow the rules jeopardizes normal prison operations and is potentially a danger to other inmates and staff."

Virginia is among only about a dozen states, mostly in the South, that limit the length of inmates' hair and beards, according to the American Correctional Chaplains Association. A handful of those allow religious accommodations for Rastafarians, Muslims, Sikhs, native Americans and others whose religious beliefs prohibit shaving or cutting their hair.

There is no hair policy for federal prisoners.

The U.S. Supreme Court has said that constitutional protections, like the right to practice religion, do not end at the prison gates. Congress has said institutions can restrict religious liberties only for compelling reasons, like security, but the policies must be the least restrictive means to accomplish that.

Still, inmates have rarely been successful in challenging prison grooming policies.

A native American inmate spent a year in his cell and lost other privileges before a federal appeals court ruled in 2005 that the California prison system's ban on long hair violated his religious freedom.

In a 2002 case, a group of Rastafarian and Muslim federal inmates who were housed in Virginia prisons challenged the grooming policy and a federal court ordered the [Bureau of Prisons](http://content.usatoday.com/topics/topic/Federal%2BBureau%2Bof%2BPrisons) to transfer them to other facilities that did not have such policies. The court also required the federal prison system to evaluate inmates' religious beliefs and refrain from sending them to Virginia or other states with burdensome grooming policies.

But in the case filed by the Virginia state prisoners, a federal appeals court ruled in 2008 that the Department of Corrections' argument that inmates could hide weapons and other contraband in long hair or easily change their appearance upon escape was compelling enough reason to require trimmed hair.

Kent Willis, executive director of the Virginia chapter of the [American Civil Liberties Union](http://content.usatoday.com/topics/topic/Organizations/Non-profits%2C%2BActivist%2BGroups/American%2BCivil%2BLiberties%2BUnion), which represented the inmates, said the outcome was deeply disappointing because he knew the sincerest believers would be those who would be punished most severely.

"This has a disturbingly mean-spirited aspect to it," Willis says. "This is not about corrections. This is not about security, but it's about punishment. In this instance, people are being punished for their religious beliefs."

Today, the department cuts each inmate's hair when he enters prison. If he refuses, the use of "reasonable force and restraints" is authorized. If the inmate grows his hair back and refuses to cut it, he is sent to segregation.

Thomas Fitzgerald, 52, had grown his locks for 10 years before he was sent to prison for possession of a firearm by a felon. He said he started going bald after his hair was unceremoniously shorn from his head, and he's convinced that there's a connection.

The last time he saw his locks they were being stuffed into a red biohazard plastic bag. He asked to send them home for a proper burial; his request was denied.

Fitzgerald has chosen to abide by the grooming policy so that he can work toward growing the Rastafarian community inside the prison and when he is released in three years. But it is hard to shake the humiliation: "Every day is a real struggle for me because I perceive shaving my face a serious act of mutilation to myself," he says.

**'Irie'**

With his prison-issue eyeglasses, scrawny frame and boyish smile, Gibson looks much less of a menace than the prisoners stacking lunch trays just outside the glass-walled visitation room.

Even less intimidating are his words — talk of love, faith, "upful vibrations" and, most perplexing of all, happiness.

Now 38, he's proud of the things he's accomplished while behind bars. Gibson quit school at 15, but once in prison he completed vocational training in building maintenance and carpentry and in 1994 got his GED, something he said gave him an "irie," or peaceful and happy, feeling.

Gibson's five co-defendants are out of prison now. He has been denied parole 12 times for the same reason — the serious nature of his crime — but he believes his refusal to bow to the grooming policy likely played a role in that.

"Life is what we make of it," he says. "Jah give each person the fullness of free will to create our own personal heaven or hell and joy or pain."

He tries "to create good irie vibes of joy and not of pain."

He has bad days, but he tries not to brood, even though he remains in isolation, year after year, as those who murder, rape and maim other inmates are rotated in and out.

He has now been in isolation nearly 4,000 days. He begins each one with prayer, reading scripture and meditation.

At night, when the lights are out, he listens to rodents scampering through the ducts. Sometimes they run across his cell floor and he cringes.

When it's quiet he can hear a train chugging by and he allows his mind to wonder briefly what is on it, and where's it's going.

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**Questions**

1. What crimes has Gibson committed and what sentence did he receive?
2. What is this prison’s policy and why? How has it affected Gibson?
3. Do you find the prison’s policy necessary to ensure safety? Why or why not?
4. What ways could the prison ensure safety *without* keeping people like Gibson in solitary confinement?
5. If there are alternatives for Gibson’s punishment, does that automatically make it cruel and unusual?