

Asylum Re-Unites Family

Written by Robert ID1239

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This past January, 40-year-old Larry Stiner's household more than doubled in size. His six half-siblings, born and raised in the South American country of Suriname, finally received the political asylum they were promised by the United States government nearly 11 years ago.

Larry and his half-sisters Kishana, Latanya, Natisha and Taminia and his half-brothers Lige and MTume, share the same father: Watani Stiner, a San Quentin inmate sentenced to life in prison in 1969 for conspiracy to commit murder.

The conviction was the result of a dispute between two black civil rights groups that left two men dead. Watani Stiner's brother George was also convicted. In 1975, the two brothers, fearing an alleged retaliatory plot by white prison guards, escaped from San Quentin and fled to Suriname.

Earlier this month, the family eagerly awaited the final step in its reunification: Watani Stiner's parole from prison.

For Stiner, it's been a long journey. He was a film student at UCLA in the mid-1960s when the Civil Rights movement attracted many disenfranchised young men to black power organizations. Watani (who then went by his given name of Larry) was drawn into a group called Us, run by Maulana Karenga, founder of the holiday Kwanzaa. A year after Us became one of the most visible black power groups in Los Angeles, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale founded the Black Panther Party in Oakland.

According to numerous books and newspaper articles, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover's counterintelligence program began to covertly fan the flames of violence between such groups, hoping to prevent the rise of another Martin Luther King or Malcolm X. In August 1967, Hoover wrote an internal memorandum to all FBI offices "to expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit or otherwise neutralize the activities of black nationalist hate-type organizations and groupings, their leadership, spokesmen, membership and supporters."

On Jan. 17, 1968, Us and the Black Panthers met at UCLA to resolve a dispute between the two groups. Both Watani and his brother George Stiner were present. The meeting itself was

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uneventful, but afterward, sparked by nervous tension--and possible FBI involvement--one man shot his weapon into the crowd, causing panic and further gunfire that ultimately left two men dead. Watani himself was shot in the shoulder. In 1969, the Stiner brothers were indicted with three others for the deaths of Alprentice "Bunchy" Carter and John Huggins. The brothers were eventually convicted, although evidence presented at the trial remains controversial.

Watani was first placed in a Chino guidance center, then Soledad Prison. In 1970, he joined George in San Quentin, and learning of an alleged plot against their lives by white prison guards, the brothers planned their escape.

In 1974, aided by a black prison guard, the two men escaped.

Watani and George fled to Guyana, an international hub for the black power movement. (George Stiner's whereabouts are unknown today.) Watani settled in politically volatile Suriname, a Dutch colony bordering Guyana. There, he met a Surinamese woman and started a family. Civil war broke out in 1980, and the already weak economy of Suriname collapsed. For more than a decade, Stiner and his family faced cholera and tuberculosis epidemics, as well as heavily armed soldiers. Fearing for his children, Stiner eventually turned himself over to American authorities in exchange for their political asylum in 1994.

The U. S. government was slow to grant the asylum request, and in the interim, the children's mother became unstable. They were shuffled off to separate foster care homes. Finally, last January, all six children were reunited in Los Angeles with their half-brother, Larry Stiner, his wife, Diane, and their two daughters.

The children, says Stiner, are just "eager for Dad to come home."

Though Larry Stiner is determined to keep this family together, adding six children to an existing household of four on one income has been stressful. Larry works as a communications operator for the city of Los Angeles. When he gets home at the end of the day, his and Diane's work has only just begun.

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Enter Suzi Jestadt, a Marin County woman who made Watani Stiner's acquaintance when she began working as a volunteer this year with a men's support group inside San Quentin.

Jestadt was so moved by Watani's story and his children's situation that she began to look for ways to help out. She and Pastor Liza Klein of the San Rafael First United Methodist Church are in the final stages of setting up a fund called the San Quentin Families Project.

"Watani is the one that everyone looks up to and admires in the group," says Jestadt. "He has a quality of peacefulness. Working with him and these men has completely transformed my life. He's a hero to me."

The purpose of the project is to help the families of prisoners in need and, says Jestadt, "to encourage inmates to stay in relationships with their children while they are serving their time."

On April 5, Watani Stiner stood before the San Quentin parole board for his annual hearing. The board denied his parole, calling him an "unreasonable risk to society." Watani's actions in the 1960s now qualify as an "act of terrorism" under Section 865 of the Homeland Security Act.

"There is no possible way that he is a risk to society," says Larry Stiner. "We're talking about someone who was 19 during a time of social turmoil. [The parole board] paints him as someone you shouldn't dare let on the street, and suggested that all those years he was in Suriname he was living in the Caribbean, high on the land, when that was not true at all."

Watani will get to see his children, for the first time in 12 years, when they visit him in San Quentin next week. He plans to continue fighting for his release, and hope remains that the family will one day be permanently reunited.

"Over the years, he [Watani] has compiled documents that are full of inconsistencies about his case," says Jestadt. "He thinks he will be able to take the case to lower courts. He has more than proven his good behavior."