



Summary of Lawsuit: Cotellessa v. Bettencourt et al

Status of Lawsuit

- Lawsuit is Filed with Federal Court of the Eastern District of California; it is in the initial discovery stages
- I, Dr. Cotellessa, am seeking an attorney to represent me in this \$10 million lawsuit

Beginning of the Story

2018

- During my doctoral defense, a respected committee member criticized the focus of my work studying only elite polymaths (Renaissance men/women).
- My research, admittedly, primarily looked at very successful and renowned Polymaths, following the advisement of my Committee Chair to study only very strong examples of polymathic success.
- My intention wasn't to convey that polymathy is exclusively for elite individuals but instead, I wanted to emphasize its accessibility to everyone.

Research Shift

Decision to Study Non-Elite Polymaths

- It started with the question “*Where do I study polymaths who are not elite?*”
- I realized that the most non-elite place you can find is prison. Prison is the total opposite of the elite.
- I also thought that it was probably a good place to study polymathy because polymathy is associated with creativity. I understood many prisoners can be scrappy and creative under duress even with limited resources in the carceral environment.

Correspondence with Shawn

Reaching out

- I had never spoken to anyone in prison before. I was completely unfamiliar with that world.
- I found out about Shawn Rodriguez on the internet. I thought he was a strong polymath in prison; he had made a number of video tutorials from prison indicating his polymathic abilities.
- His contact information was listed; I reached out to him.
- It felt like we were from different worlds: Shawn, a convicted individual and me, a government worker and academic doctor.
- I figured the best way to contact him would be through sending him an electronic message.
- I reached out and he called me a few days later.

Correspondence with Shawn

Reaching out

- During our first phone call, I told him I was an academic doctor who had studied polymaths and Shawn said “I am a polymath.” Most people don’t even know the word but Shawn did and identified as a polymath, thus validating my initial sense that he qualified as one.
- I took the time to get to know him as a person at first.
- Shawn and I had regular phone calls and we became pen pals via mail.
- I met Shawn during the Pandemic; in 2020, I did not leave my house at that time. Also, I didn’t want to give a prisoner I didn’t know my home address.

Mailing Incident

Background

- From 2018 onward, when my doctoral dissertation was out in the world and online, people began to read and admire it.
- There were several people, not just one, who found my work, looked me up, and found out that I worked at the Office of Personnel Management (OPM). Several people I do not know mailed me correspondence unrelated to my OPM work to the OPM physical mailing address. Colleagues at OPM would forward that unexpected, non-work-related mail to me, no problem.

Mailing Incident

Mails from Admirers of my Academic Work

- During the pandemic, I stayed at home for a full year. I was very scared to go into any store, post office, or other locations indoors. I avoided doing that sort of thing as much as possible to avoid COVID.
- I asked the Mail Room Supervisor at OPM if they would forward mail from work to my home address. This way, the mail would come directly to my house and I would not have to leave my house and risk getting COVID. She agreed this was no problem.
- So for these reasons, I told Shawn he could send me mail at my work address, since that was approved by the mail room supervisor. I also used that same address as the return address on a few outgoing mailings to Shawn.

Mailing Incident

Exchange of mails

- Shawn and I exchanged mail as we tried to get to know each other – I was learning about him, his case, and him as a polymath.
- I asked him to send me mail to my work address, as the Mail Room Supervisor approved. Especially during the pandemic, the vast majority of OPM employees did not go into the office, so the forwarding of mail was commonplace. Plus, work had already done that for me before, for my non-work related mail I received at OPM as an academic doctor.

Initially, we sent mail to and from my work address as regular mail, but when mail came up missing with no explanation because mail theft and destruction was commonplace at California State Prison Sacramento and my complaints to the Warden were dismissed, nothing fixed the problem, a clause in the California Code of Regulations that processed my mail to be processed as legal mail – logged and less likely to disappear. Legal mail never disappeared into the trash. I sent papers, envelopes, CDs, and they went through fine, so I had no reason to suspect this was out of the ordinary. Keep in mind I was brand new to the prison world and the Help Free Shawn Rodriguez.

Mailing Incident

Sending Items to Shawn

- The more I got to know Shawn, the more I realized I cared about him as a human being and that I wanted to help him out. I learned he had been Wrongfully Convicted for crimes he did not commit; thus, the Help Free Shawn Movement was born in 2020, and has grown over the years.
- After knowing Shawn approximately 8 weeks, I wanted to send him some little gifts (magazines, CDs, samples of cologne, lotion, and a cleaning cloth for electric screens), but I didn't know that this gesture would cause me so much trouble.

HELP FREE SHAWN MOVEMENT



HELP FREE
SHAWN RODRIGUEZ

Website: <https://helpfreeshawn.com>

Facebook:

www.facebook.com/groups/helpfreeshawnrodriguez

Youtube: [@helpfreeshawnrodriguez](https://www.youtube.com/@helpfreeshawnrodriguez)

Twitter/X: [@helpfreeshawn](https://twitter.com/helpfreeshawn)

TikTok: [@help.free.shawn.r](https://www.tiktok.com/@help.free.shawn.r)

Mailing Incident

Sending Items to Shawn

- I also mailed him a letter to make it official that I wanted to help him and that I was creating “Help Free Shawn Movement” out of my home office to do legal advocacy work to obtain his freedom. I shifted gears away from studying polymaths in prison, and instead focused on helping Shawn which seemed much more important given the injustices done to him.
- I was unfamiliar with prison. I come from a different world. I tried to search the rules but found the websites confusing and unclear. Shawn had CDs, magazines, and scented oils all in prison. I was led to believe these were items he was allowed in prison. I sent these gifts as a surprise, thoughtful gesture.

Mailing Incident

Background Considerations

- One time, I sent a music card to Shawn and he informed me that the card was taken apart by mail room staff, the electronics were removed from the card, and the rest was forwarded to him.
- That taught me pretty early on that if I inadvertently mail something in that's against the prison's rules, they'll just dispose of it.
- In my head, I thought it's not that big of a deal if I send something that's not allowed that I'm not aware of; they have a mechanism in place to filter out anything that's not permitted.
- I did not send anything illegal like drugs or weapons.

Professional Consequences

Federal Job Investigation

- Shortly after I sent the gifts to Shawn, I received a call from an Investigator at my job. Nobody from the prison ever contacted me regarding my mailings to Shawn despite what it says in the California Code of Regulations. They're required to give me and Shawn a warning and let us know if we needed to change what we mail to each other. Paul Bettencourt played word games saying I could not send legal mail because I do not qualify. But the definitions of the Title 15 thus allow an employee from the OPM to send Legal Mail. The progressive discipline listed in the Title 15 never occurred. The Prison never contacted me. If they had simply followed their own rules, this whole problem could have been avoided. Bettencourt and Chavez should have been aware of the rules governing their employment with CDCR.

Professional Consequences

Federal Job Investigation

- The prison staff never contacted me whatsoever to clarify the rules for mail.
- Someone from the prison went to my employer and began providing recorded phone calls, private letters, private emails, etc. without a warrant and without my permission. Yes, the prison obviously can access phone calls, letters, and emails, but they had no right to share those communications with my employer on the other side of the country.

Title 15/California Code of Regulations

- Section 3141 of the Title 15: Outlines the definition and handling of “confidential mail” which includes legal mail sent to or received from specific entities such as employees of the OPM.
- Given that I work at the OPM and given that I was doing legal advocacy work to help Shawn with his wrongful convictions, I figured using the confidential mail was fine.

Title 15/California Code of Regulations

- Title 15 Section 3143: Confidential Correspondence is mail between inmates and individuals or entities which is protected, and more likely to make it to the recipient than regular prison mail. Confidential mail is required to be opened only in the presence of the inmate to whom it is addressed. If prison officials suspect that Confidential Mail has contraband, they may open the mail in the presence of the inmate, but they are not allowed to read it.

Title 15/California Code of Regulations

- California State Prison Sacramento staff members did NOT follow this Title 15 directive.
- They opened the mail NOT in front of Shawn, and then went to my employer to disclose the contents of what I had sent to Shawn.
- Shawn also was sending me Confidential/Legal mail in return, to OPM, including a large box with approximately 2,000 pages of Shawn's legal paperwork.

Title 15/California Code of Regulations

- When OPM received the box, they proceeded to hold it for an entire calendar year, thus slowing down progress of the Help Free Shawn Rodriguez movement. This all occurred because Bettencourt and Chavez inappropriately and illegally went to my employer and provided confidential communications to an outside entity, with no warrant nor permission to do so.

Title 15/California Code of Regulations

- They said because the zip code from where the OPM is located and where it was postmarked from were different, they had a reasonable belief it wasn't from someone at the OPM. That's what it says in the Rules Violation Report. In such instances, the mail still had to be opened in front of the inmate. **THAT NEVER HAPPENED.** If they had brought it to Shawn, and if there was any problem with what we were doing, the staff should've informed us that we needed to make a modification. That would have resolved the issue.

Title 15/California Code of Regulations

- The Title 15 says that for non-serious mail violations, the first step is to issue a written warning, to notify the inmate of the violation and to prevent future occurrences. No crimes were committed here; though I may have inadvertently broken the prison's rules by sending magazines, CDs, etc., I broke no laws. Nothing I sent was illegal. And given my formal advocacy work for the Help Free Shawn Rodriguez movement, the use of Confidential mail to ensure it properly got to Shawn made sense to me.
- If the violation is repeated or deemed severe, the institution may impose additional consequences, such as the temporary suspension of certain privileges like using confidential mail. Such suspensions are usually limited to a period (e.g., up to 6 months) and is typically used as a corrective measure rather than a punitive one.

Title 15/California Code of Regulations

- When there are no laws or felonies involved, and the violation is purely administrative or procedural (e.g., improper marking of legal mail, minor errors), the consequences are generally less severe and are focused on compliance rather than punishment.
- Bettencourt and Chavez made up that I committed a felony, opened the envelope outside Shawn's presence despite clear guidance in the Title 15 (which has remained the same since 2013). Staff should have known these rules. Maybe they intentionally decided to defy the rules.

Title 15/California Code of Regulations

- Title 15, Section 3145 explains that Shawn should have been given the opportunity to see the mail, and if it is not allowed, decide to either dispose of the unpermitted contents or pay to have it returned to the sender. This never happened.
- My civil rights were violated when prison staff went to my employer and never even spoke to me directly about these issues being problematic. It was done sadistically & maliciously to cause harm. Bettencourt and Chavez deviated from the policies they're paid to enforce.

Professional Consequences

Federal Investigation

- I met Shawn in August and the investigation by OPM started in October for my use of mail for non-work related mail.
- The investigation went on for a year by OPM investigators with them closely monitoring all my work, phone calls, work emails, plus my private, non-work related phone calls, letters, and emails to Shawn, which the CDCR staff freely provided to my employer.
- Paul Bettencourt was the Correctional Officer who provided all of these private communications to my employer. He had no permission and no warrants to provide these private communications to my employer. Bettencourt and Chavez clearly did so with the purpose of causing harm to my professional reputation and my career in general.

Professional Consequences

Federal Investigation

- In the end, OPM decided to fire me for my association with a “criminal” and wanted to ban me from any and all federal employment because of my involvement helping Shawn. They said my involvement with him was “unbecoming of a Federal employee.”
- What they said implies that it wasn’t about the mail; it was about my association with Shawn, our budding romantic connection that developed over time, neither of which had anything to do with the use of workplace mail.
- The OPM Investigation was shoddy and one-sided. I was never given a chance to defend myself properly and was only allowed to answer questions they wanted to be addressed. A lawsuit against OPM is being considered.

Professional Consequences

Resignation

- I hired my own attorney who helped negotiate on my behalf. I resigned after a stellar 15-year career, in order to avoid having a “firing” on my official record.
- The OPM was supposed to keep all of this off of my record and they certainly did not.
- On my way out, it was performance appraisal time and my boss gave me three out of five on all measures. I had never gotten scores that low.
- Instead of actually critiquing my work performance, she put no narrative comments essentially dooming me from getting any federal employment in the future.
- To apply for future Federal government jobs requires submission of the last performance appraisal. My record is permanently tarnished and my ability to get Federal work, ruined.
- I dedicated 15 years of my life to government work; it was the only career I had ever known and I intended to stay there until retirement.

Professional Consequences

Resignation

- OPM fired me for associating with an incarcerated person in my off-work time.
- Prior to this, my boss suggested I would be likely to be promoted in the near future to her job and perhaps become a senior leader over time.
- OPM also put together a flyer with my photo and verbiage saying if Angela Cotellessa tries to enter any OPM facility, don't let her in. She's a risk to our safety and property, which was not true. I have no history of violence or theft.
- Shortly after leaving OPM, another federal agency, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, showed a sincere interest in hiring me and that offer went away due to OPM's treatment of me during that time.

Personal Impact

Job Loss

- I was a powerhouse employee, so it was really a shock to my ego and mental health to be forced out of a job I had done so well for so long.
- I became deeply depressed after being forced to resign. I had to get anti-depressant medications.
- I began experiencing health problems including Vasovagal Syncope (fainting), leading me to several hospitalizations (the medical bills were expensive, and I had lost my health insurance from the OPM job when they forced me out).

Personal Impact

Job Loss

- I also was going through a divorce, had a breast cancer scare, lost my income, lost my career, and was getting used to being a single mom where I have no family of my own.
- I have struggled to make an income again over the past few years. I've had to move into my basement while renting out other parts of my house to be able to survive financially.

Advocacy and Retaliation

Retaliation by Prison Officials

- Previously, Shawn was a whistleblower against Correctional Officer abuses at a state prison in San Diego.
- Officer Paul Bettencourt and Officer Chris Chavez made it their mission to punish Shawn in any way they could think of for daring to tell the truth about Correctional Officer misconduct.
- Unfortunately, I was victimized by Bettencourt and Chavez when they decided to target me and get me fired, hoping to get me to run away from the prison world, and abandon helping Shawn, who they did not like because he was a whistleblower. They engaged in whistleblower retaliation against Shawn, by targeting and abusing me, and going out of their way to ruin my stellar career when they had no right to contact my employer; I broke no laws. They violated my Civil Rights.
- They provided private communication to an outside agency without legal authority to do so.

Who is Bettencourt and Chavez?

Inmates Attack Correctional Officers, Correctional Counselor, in Three Separate Incidents

Richard J. Donovan Correctional Facility officials are investigating the incidents

By NBC 7 Staff • Published July 17, 2017 • Updated on July 19, 2017 at 8:31 am

Authorities at the Richard J. Donovan Correctional Facility (RJD) are investigating three separate attacks that left three correctional officers and one correctional counselor injured.

The first incident happened Monday morning when inmate Ronnie Moody first approached a correctional counselor and asked to speak with him during an alarm response in the Facility C yard.

Moody, 35, first came to RJD from San Francisco with an 11-year eight-month sentence for vehicle theft by a second striker, attempted robbery, resisting arrest and attempting to remove a firearm from a peace officer.

When the 35-year-old inmate approached the counselor, the counselor told Moody he could not talk with him during an active alarm.

Moody entered his office and began striking the officer in the head. The correctional counselor used physical force to defend himself.

Meanwhile, a control booth officer fired a 40-millimeter direct impact round at Moody. He was



Trending Stories



NASA
Stranded astronauts Butch Wilmore and Suni Williams' families speak out



DONALD TRUMP
Trump says his focus is ensuring Democrats 'don't cheat,' not voter turnout — echoing efforts to undermine election



NEWS
Oil tanker abandoned, adrift and ablaze after Red Sea

Shawn recorded this incident and provided proof to authorities saying staff members attacked prisoners brutally. Shawn testified in that case in 2023 after providing video of the incident that proved the opposite had taken place. Cos had attacked prisoners.

Who is Bettencourt and Chavez?

RBGG Files Motion to Stop Guards at Correctional Facility in San Diego from Assaulting and Terrorizing People with Disabilities

February 28, 2020

Gay Grunfeld, Michael Bien, Penny Godbold and Michael Freedman of RBGG filed a motion in federal court in Oakland on February 28, 2020 seeking a remedial plan to stop correctional officers at the Richard J. Donovan Correctional facility ("RJD") in San Diego County from assaulting and terrorizing incarcerated people with disabilities. The press release is set out below. The motion is here: [Motion to Stop Defs from Assaulting, Abusing and Retaliating Against People w Disabilities at RJD, 2-28-2020](#) A proposed order and exhibits, including plaintiff declarations, are set out and linked at the conclusion of the press release.

Attorneys for Prisoners With Disabilities File Motion to Stop Guards at Correctional Facility in San Diego from Assaulting and Terrorizing Inmates

San Francisco – February 28, 2020 – On February 28, 2020, attorneys for a class of California prisoners and parolees with disabilities filed their Motion to Stop Defendants from Assaulting, Abusing and Retaliating Against Persons With Disabilities at R.J. Donovan Correctional Facility in federal district court in a long-standing ADA class action, *Armstrong v. Newsom*, N.D. Cal. No. 4:94-cv-02307-CW. Plaintiff's Motion seeks a remedial plan to stop correctional officers at the Richard J. Donovan Correctional facility ("RJD") in San Diego County from assaulting and terrorizing incarcerated people with disabilities.

As alleged in the fifty-four declarations filed with the Motion, officers are throwing people out of wheelchairs, punching deaf people when they cannot hear spoken orders, beating

Shawn was instrumental in Body Cams being required at the San Diego prison.

Who is Bettencourt and Chavez?

- Members of the Investigative Services Unit at the California State Prison Sacramento.
- Both were removed from the Investigative Services Unit for misconduct.
- Please see the below newspaper article documenting abuse at the California State Prison Sacramento:
[Guard's overdose death reveals hazing culture at CA prison | Sacramento Bee \(sacbee.com\)](#)
[California prison guard dies by suicide after reporting officers faked documents, planted drugs \(ktvu.com\)](#)
- Valentino Rodriguez, Jr was talking about the ISU that Bettencourt and Chavez were on at that time. The late officer Rodriguez, Jr said, “that team is broken” to Stromeier.
- Many believe officer Rodriguez Jr.’s death was a murder made to look like a suicide.

Who is Bettencourt and Chavez?

Correctional officer's death exposes hazing, toxic culture at Calif. prison

Valentino Rodriguez Jr. was "throwing up all the time at work and hyperventilating" from depression and PTSD

April 16, 2021 09:23 AM

By Wes Venteicher

[The Sacramento Bee](#)

WEST SACRAMENTO, Calif. — Valentino Rodriguez Jr. texted his wife, Irma, an hour and a half before she found him dead Oct. 21 at their home in West Sacramento.

Rodriguez Jr. was 30, and had been a correctional officer at a state prison in Folsom. Nine months earlier he had gone out on leave for stress, telling his wife he could no longer tolerate the harassment and threats from other officers.

He had met with the prison's warden a week earlier, on Oct. 15, and on the 21st some of the officers were calling his phone.

"It's out now that I told on the team," he wrote in the text to his wife.

Buying Body Scanners?



Start Here

GET THE GUIDE

Irma Rodriguez, 26, returned home from dinner with two friends to find her husband lying purple-faced on the bathroom floor. Scattered nearby were pills, tin foil and a straw. The Yolo County Coroner's Office pronounced him dead at 9:25 p.m.

'On Our Watch' investigates misconduct in California's New Folsom prison

By  Weslan Hansen, Editorial Intern | March 6, 2024

[f SHARE](#) [TWEET](#) [EMAIL](#) [PRINT](#) [MORE](#)



Valentino Rodriguez Sr. holds a photo of his son, Valentino Rodriguez Jr., who worked at California State Prison in Sacramento known as "New Folsom" prior to his death in October 2020.

The latest season of the KQED's investigative podcast *On Our Watch* looks at abuse

Sytematic Issues

Unjust Consequences

- If I could do it over again, I would have figured out another way to send and receive mail, but the Mailroom Supervisor did say it was fine.
- I lost my employment in the middle of the pandemic while dealing with a divorce and raising my daughter as a single mom. This cost me an additional 25 years of employment in government which I had planned to work, and a loss of millions of dollars in income I may never be able to earn ever again now, in addition to the psychological and physical tolls this took on me and the financial burden it created for my small family.

Conclusion

This lawsuit stands as a powerful assertion of my civil rights, which were blatantly violated by Officers Bettencourt and Chavez. These officers, in a calculated and malicious act, unlawfully provided private letters, phone calls, and electronic messages - sent during my personal time - to my employer. Their actions were not just an invasion of my privacy but a direct attack on my livelihood, forcing me to resign to avoid unjust termination. This egregious violation of Title 15 regulations underscores the systemic abuse of power within the correctional system. The officers' actions were not only personal retaliation against me but were also intended to silence Shawn Rodriguez, a courageous whistleblower exposing corruption and abuses within the prison. Their actions were a clear attempt to intimidate and punish those who dare to speak the truth about the brutal realities of correctional misconduct.

Conclusion

I seek justice and accountability for the blatant violations of my civil rights and the intentional disregard of Title 15 regulations by Officers Bettencourt and Chavez. These officers abused their power, unlawfully providing my private communications sent to Shawn Rodriguez to my employer. Their actions, fueled by a vendetta against Shawn for his courage in exposing correctional officer misconduct, led to my forced resignation under the threat of termination. This unlawful retaliation not only disregarded my rights but also served as a direct attack on whistleblower protections, aiming to silence those who dare to speak the truth about abuses within the correctional system. This lawsuit is not only about financial restitution; it is about holding accountable those who believe they can operate above the law. It is a stand against the systemic corruption that allows such abuses to occur and demand for justice for all those who have been wronged by those sworn to uphold the law.