FPEP POST

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Many of the works in this issue are accompanied by photos of the authors. Some of our incarcerated writers chose not to submit a picture of themselves. In place of an author photo, we have included artwork by our incarcerated FPEP students.

Most of the artwork, essays, and poems included in the magazine are by currently and formerly incarcerated students from around the country. There is an icon denoting which state the writer is from next to their name.

EDITOR'S NOTE

The FPEP Post is the student-run magazine of the Florida Prison Education Project, an initiative of the University of Central Florida that provides higher education to incarcerated students in seven correctional facilities in Central Florida. In this issue, we feature stories of incarcerated people and changemakers from across America. Learn about the impact education has had on a man who has served 55 years in an Illinois prison in "Everybody Wants More Time!," the importance of strong inside-out connections in "Proximity: Bridging the Gap Between Our Communities and Our Incarcerated Population," and the fight for air conditioning in a Florida prison in "Stories from the Field: The Heat Behind these Prison Walls". Education in prison gives incarcerated students a different path forward, benefiting both the individual and the community. At FPEP we are thankful to be able to provide this life-changing opportunity to people in Central Florida, but we could not do it without your help.

Thank you for all the support!

EDITOR: *Aiya Messina*
DESIGNER: *Yaseen El Ghandour*
A publication of the Florida Prison Education Project

CONTENTS

A Conversation with David Gonzales

Aiya Messina

Aiya Messina is a graduate student in the University of Central Florida's Public Administration and Nonprofit Management program, as well as the FPEP Program Coordinator. She is passionate about incarcerated people's rights and the much-needed reformation of the criminal justice system.

In my role as Editor of the FPEP Post, I am honored to be able to hear so many people's stories. In February 2025 I had the privilege of speaking to David Gonzales, a formerly incarcerated youth mentor in Nebraska, over Zoom. Gonzales was sentenced to 40-60 years in prison at the age of 20 due to his involvement in gang activity. Now, he is a free man dedicating his time to preventing young men from going down the path he did.

Aiya Messina: Good morning! Thank you for taking the time to share your story with our FPEP Post readers.

David Gonzales: Thank you for having me.

Messina: You have been making great strides since your release. Do you mind giving us a breakdown of your sentence?

Gonzales: Definitely. My involvement in the criminal justice system started really young, I was only 12 when I ran away and ended up homeless in Los Angeles. I was arrested and incarcerated for the first time at 13. When I was 19, I got charged with, and later convicted of, a violent gun crime that I committed as a gang member. My sentence was 40 to 60 years; 20 to 40 years for the first count and a concurrent 19 to 20 year sentence for the second count. An added use of a weapon charge that added another 10 to 20 consecutive years on top of it. Nebraska has a half-time good time law, and after spending 20 years inside working on myself I was eligible for this. I applied for parole in 2021, was denied, and reapplied in 2024. I was released on November 14, 2024 and served a total of 23 ½ years.

Messina: That long of a sentence must have been terrifying at such a young age. What did your life inside look like?

Gonzales: It was. I was very high up in gang leadership, and spent about 15 years in segregation. The correctional officers (COs) were concerned about the risk I posed being out in the general population. Sometime during my 12th year inside solitary confinement, I just looked around and asked myself what I was doing. I was tired of living that life, I didn't want to serve my full 34 years with good time and I really didn't want to die in prison. At that moment I turned back to Jesus Christ, and

religion has guided me ever since. I made the decision to end my involvement long before I actually left.

Messina: What was it like leaving gang life?

Gonzales: It was the hardest thing I have ever done. About a year or two after I had decided to leave, I put the plan into action. I went into a severe depressive state and at one point made an attempt on my life.

Messina: That sounds incredibly difficult; I'm glad you are here and sharing your experience. How did your life change after officially leaving?

Gonzales: It was difficult at first, but I quickly learned how to occupy myself with other things. I took on a janitor role in segregation which gave me some more freedom to move around and clean. As someone who had been there for so long I had more privileges, like access to commissary, writing and receiving letters, and I was able to share some of that with the others, as well as mentor and share my stories with the other [incarcerated men] as a way to bring hope and community in what felt like the most slowest place on earth. I also had the opportunity to take an anger management class and violence reduction program in segregation.

Messina: Anger management is such a great class to have on offer! Were you able to participate in any others?

Gonzales: Yes! I took a course on the 7 Habits for Highly Effective People, participated in the Life Project, Anger Management/Violence Reduction, the 180 RAP (reentry program), WRAP (wellness reduction action plan), Fixing Toxic Masculinity, as well as some intensive outpatient drug rehab programs. I took an entrepreneur class through the RISE organization for 6 months where I put together a business plan that I am trying to enact now. I think the one I am most proud of is the juvenile peer support program.

Messina: That is quite the list. What was the juvenile peer support program?

Gonzales: It was a program where I, alongside 6 other guys, moved into a separate wing in a juvenile facility to work as Big Brothers. 5 of the guys were lifers, all of us were highly trusted by the COs. We worked as mentors, but would also step in if the boys ever got violent with each other or their teachers, as a sort of trusted intermediary between them and the COs.

Messina: That sounds incredible!

Gonzales: Thank you. I am working on the outside as a mentor to young system-impacted men now, and I feel like it is truly my calling. I am also working on my nonprofit Gangster2Godster ministries on top of my speaking obligations and second-chance advocacy work.

Messina: Well, thank you for taking the time for this [interview] within your very busy schedule. I think what you are doing is so great. I look forward to seeing more in the future!

Gonzales: Thank you!

Everybody Wants More Time!

Mark Smith

Mark Smith is a seventy-five-year-old student at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign who has been incarcerated for fifty-five years. He was born in Chicago and went to school in Crystal Lake Il. region, nearly in Wisconsin. He served honorably in the Army during the Vietnam era and works hard to improve his writing.

I remember the past as a time that I would very much like to be able to go back to. I would change some of my dumber and criminally oriented choices. I still remember it as a wonderful time, despite my mistakes.

I see the present as a place that I have been trapped in.

The future scares the hell out of me. I have virtually no control over any of it at this point, and that is purely of my making.

Someone once told me that a person has only a small window of control over anything that happens in their life. You have no control over your past, it already happened. You cannot control your future since you aren't there for it. That leaves only the present. The place in time that you move around in and have some control over. You need to focus on a proactive week, not a 5 year plan. I know this now, after ending up here with many regrets. Before, I took my beautiful family and support group for granted. I had everything a young man could want. I was of a mind that it was how things are and would stay that simple forever. I could have altered my entire universe if only I had known!

I had a decent middle-class family. Not a lot of money, but plenty of love and support. I was an average student, physically on the small side, and got bullied on occasion by the usual suspects, the school thugs. It wasn't a big deal, and I was fine until I realized that I could avoid that by attacking them first. I started getting suspended from school as the bullies tried to get even. It turns out that I could really fight and wasn't afraid to do so. Before long it was affecting my grades, and I drifted away from the school scene. I enlisted in the Army after a school counselor told me if I wanted to fight, I could do it there. I did well at first and was sent all over the world, which kept me busy and out of trouble as I put my energy into exploring other places and cultures instead. After a while, though, the old habits set back in. I was court-martialed for fighting while stationed in downtown Mannheim, Germany. The locals

always wanted to fight to show us that they didn't need Americans watching over them. I retaliated. I was sentenced to life, and such is my present.

Now on to the future! I had a screwed-up plan. My past is something much less than ideal. My present is something from a horror story in a maximum security collection of prisons. Now, I am working toward my future. I still have insurmountable amounts of time to serve and see nothing good in these places save for the school programs that I have embraced and my self-taught artwork that I use to pass many long hours. So, even though I usually like to brag about being right. Not this time. My future's so bright I've got to wear shades.

Now is the part where I do as I should and start on a brilliant new short-term plan that will eventually meld into my long-term plan and fix all this. Right? Problem? While I was busy being a jerk, I was burning up that aforementioned stuff … time.

Now I'm old and have no real room to maneuver, and the reality is setting in. I have wasted a pretty decent opportunity, my life. I could state the obvious and tell you not to do that, but I didn't set out to do that either. It just happened while I was doing other things. I have discovered that the key to the whole thing is to pay attention to the things you're doing and have a plan, or a plan will have you.

The Power of Words

Glen Waldrup

Glen Waldrup is a man of faith. He values his family and calls Indianapolis home. He has been incarcerated for 27 years and is currently working on his bachelor's degree with Eastern Illinois University.

In order to tell my story I have to go back to 1998, the very beginning of my prison sentence. When I was in court for my sentencing, the prosecutor made me feel like the lowest person that had ever lived. He told the judge that I had no redeeming qualities, as if I should be thrown away and forgotten. Locked away as an animal. At this point I was 27 or 28 years old. I still thought that I had plenty of life left in me and could become someone who could make a positive impact on the world. To have someone talk about me in the way the prosecutor did that day was difficult. I had to do some reflecting upon my life. I did not want to be remembered as a person who contributed only to someone's pain and suffering. I wanted to be remembered for something positive. So I had to begin to rebuild myself into a better person.

When I arrived at Menard Correctional Center (MCC), I had made up my mind that I was going to be the best person that I could possibly be, spiritually, mentally, and physically. I would show the prosecutor and the world that I was not a piece of trash who had no redeemable qualities. "No redeemable qualities" really got to me then - and it still has a profound effect on me today. Redeemable qualities to me means that a person can improve, to become someone who would have a positive impact on society and the individual as a whole. To say that a person has no redeemable qualities is to suggest that a person is incapable of benefiting society in any way, or changing who they are as a person. This I do not believe.

At MCC I enrolled in the G.E.D. program and within 4 months I got my G.E.D. I was elated. For me that was a big deal. However, as far as my education was concerned that was as far as I could go at that facility. So, I focused on alternative means of pursuing knowledge, by focusing on my spiritual life and lifting weights. I was baptized in the Chapel at MCC in 2004, during this time I was also fighting my case trying to win an appeal, and in 2014, I won a new sentencing hearing.

I had high hopes for the new sentencing hearing. I was sure that with all that I had done the judge and the prosecutor would see that I had redeeming qualities. I had been taking correspondence courses during this time and I had an impeccable prison record. I thought surely they would

let me out or, at least, lower my sentence to one more reflective of the man I had become. I still remember that day; the day of my new sentencing hearing my attorney presented all of the good things that I had done over the years of my incarceration. The State Attorney did not have a single bad thing to say about what I had done while incarcerated. Still, when the judge handed down his sentence he gave me a lot of time. In 2015, I was transferred from a maximum security prison to a medium security prison where I was finally able to enroll in Lake Land College.

I was so happy to be in college and I told everyone in my family; they were so surprised. I put forth a tremendous effort and did my best to remain focused, and determined. After a year or so I was transferred to Danville Correctional Center at which time I enrolled in Eastern Illinois University. As of January 2025 I am 75% complete in getting my bachelor's degree. I understand now that the prosecutor was only doing his job in making me out to be the unredeemable individual he was describing that day. However, those words still ring in my head to this day. People's words are very powerful and they should not be taken lightly. I now believe in self-affirmation. I repeat a positive phrase to myself every day and let it have a positive impact on my life.

Without the prosecutor's words and the effect they had on me, I probably would not have come this far in my transformation. That is to be the best me that I can be. Right now I have about 9 years left on my sentence and I feel like at any time the door could swing open for me to walk out and go home. I don't know what the future might hold for me when I do get out, but I am certainly not the person I was in that courtroom in 1998. Looking back those words were extremely compelling and motivating. They may have hurt me then, but they were my motivation to become who I am today.

To Catch a Villain

Angela Cacciavillano

Angela Cacciavillano, a mental health advocate and PTSD survivor, is currently incarcerated in Delaware. She is a student in Widener University's Inside-Out Program, where students and professors from the Delaware Law School go inside a local correctional institution to exchange ideas about crime, justice, and incarceration.

To catch a villain is possible to those who are willing.

It's a villain you cannot see – its name PTSD.

Come take a look inside, to the deepest, darkest depths of my mind.

My own personal perpetual hell.

I promise you was worse than any jail cell.

Hypervigilance was my constant state of mind.

Solace was no longer a friend of mine.

I screamed to the heavens God please set me free.

I'm shackled and chained to this insanity.

PTSD they say is a life sentence itself.

I was a prisoner, bound by my own mental health.

An affliction, one I did not choose,

I dare ya, come take a walk in my shoes.

A silent killer who relentlessly stalked his prey.

Plagued me with thoughts of my darkest days.

Tortured at night and haunted in my dreams.

PTSD I swear, is deeper than it seems.

It will leave you broken and weary.

Paranoia will keep you from seeing things clearly.

Stuck in fight, flight, or freeze,

If ya know, then you know what I mean.

Emotional outburst, and anxiety attacks,

Were just a few ways my body would react.

Feelings of guilt, anguish, and shame

Left me to wonder if I'd ever be the same.

My only focus was on how to survive.

When triggered you look like you're high on drugs.

That's just another, not so awesome, thing PTSD does.

Exaggerated reactions with no logical explanation,

Was a key factor that led to my incarceration.

Our system punishes the what without fixing the why.

I spent so many nights wishing I would die.

See, I suffered at the hands of abuse

Traumatized, victimized, myself worth I did deduce.

I refused to succumb to a victim reality.

I'm alive today due to my survivor mentality.

My statement, you chose to ignore

Left my mind wrecked worse than ever before

Then you took my Babygirl

My reason for breathing, my whole damn world.

Told judges, lawyers, and cops I have PTSD

They diminished my claims, refusing to believe me.

A girl so full of life became void of vitality.

I've lost all trust in the those who "serve and protect"

In my times of need, my fear and trauma you chose to neglect

I screamed for help, but nobody would listen

One way or another I promise I'll get your attention.

You can imprison my body, but not my mind.

I set myself free, I did my time.

I chose to feel therefore I was able to heal.

My chains have been broken, my spirit has been awoken.

On eagles wings I will soar.

This will be a comeback like never before.

In solidarity I stand for those too weak

For anyone that trauma stole their voices to speak.

Like a phoenix from its ashes they are risen

I've locked my villains inside their self-made prison.

PTSD does not discriminate.

My trauma you will no longer invalidate.

Instead, I was persecuted for another's iniquity.

The Reputation of a Man

Raymond Barnes

Raymond Barnes is currently incarcerated at Lake Correctional Institution in Central Florida. He is a student in the Florida Prison Education Project and wrote this piece in LIT 2090: Contemporary Literature, taught by Kathleen Hohenleitner, Christian Beck, and Heather Vazquez in Spring 2024.

"Cattle die and kinsmen die, one day you too will die.
But I know of one thing that will never die-
The good reputation of a man who has earned it."
Allfather Odin
The Poetic Edda
Havamal 75

Unfortunately, being a convicted felon is something that will stay with you for the rest of your life. In the digital age where any information can be found online, a felony conviction or a trip to prison is not something that can be hidden. However this doesn't have to be a stain that marks you forever. These things can amount to no more than a footnote in the saga of your life. You just have to determine what you will be remembered for.

Don't allow a criminal act to be what defines you. Be known as a loving father and husband that puts his family first. Be remembered as a good friend that could be counted on when times were tough. If you're a tradesman or a craftsman let the works of your hands tell your story. Share your skills and knowledge with apprentices that will brag on your name to the next generation. Be a leader in your spiritual community and help others grow in their faith.

Don't try to find that one good deed to balance the scales. Do a million good deeds to tip the scales in your favor. Don't let society's prejudices define you. Define who you are and don't worry about the naysayers. One bad act doesn't determine who you are. A lifetime of good easily crushes a few mistakes of the past. It won't always be easy, but nothing worth having is.

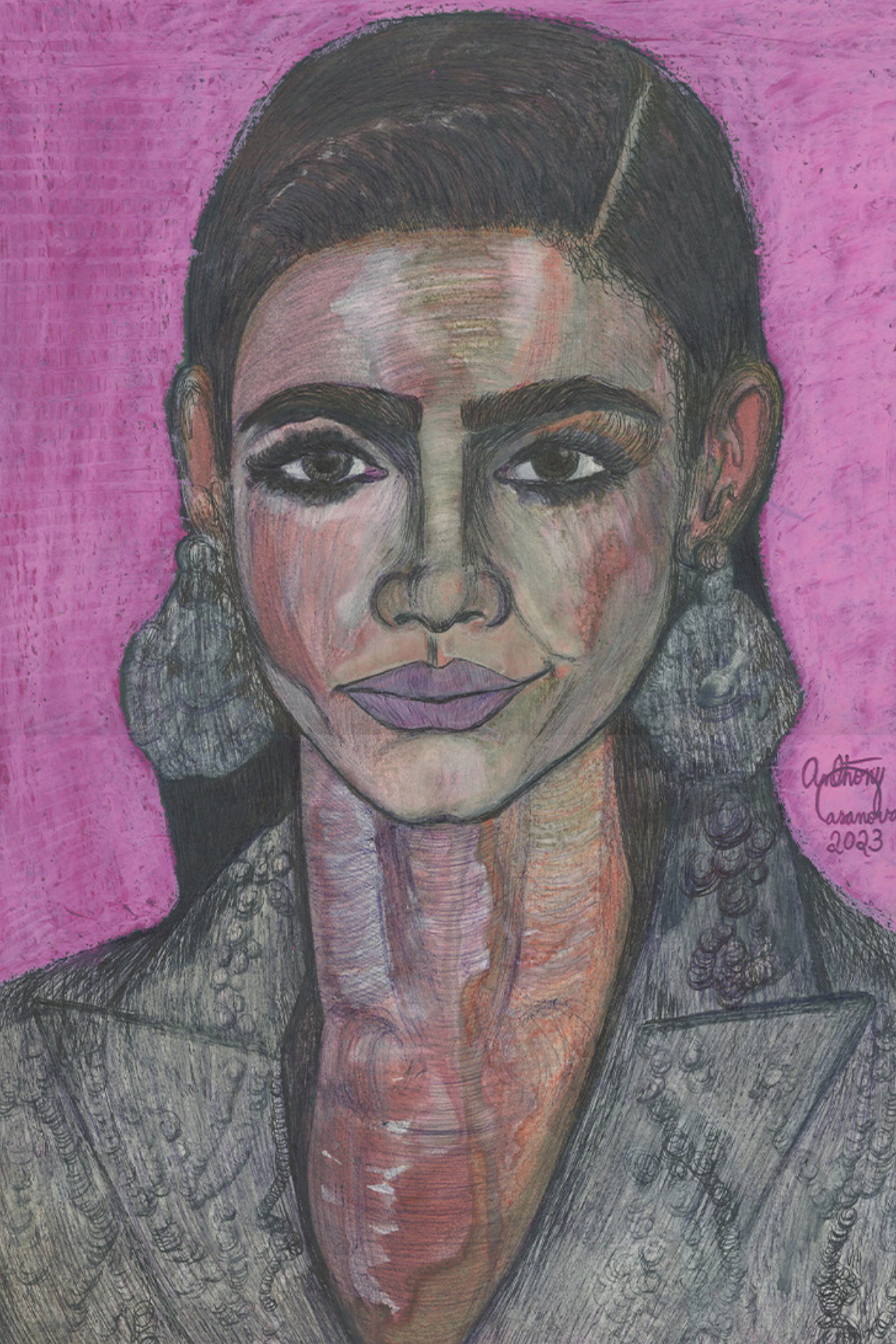
Am I a convicted bank robber? Yes. Is that who I am? NO. I'm Aly's husband and Benjamin's father. A leader in my religious community. I'm a badass bike builder and a damn good carpenter. When my time on this earth is over and my body is committed to the funeral pyre, my soul will rest easy in Valhalla knowing that I've lived a good life and will be remembered with love and the mistakes of my past long forgotten. Today is the day you start doing the work that determines how you will be remembered in the future.

State vs. Federal

Rachel Cordero

Rachel Cordero is currently incarcerated in Central Florida, where she spends her time writing poetry.

Apprehensive to the unknown
Yet pensive to the known
State vs. federal
Memories, bittersweet
Seep deep from the eyes
Unto her nostalgic face
State vs. federal
Life of the party
Now facing 25 to life
State vs. federal
Defining deception in the field
Defenseless, restless
Still relentless
State vs. federal
Incarceration led to reincarnation
State vs. federal
However,
The biggest case
I'll ever face
Me vs. me


Anthony
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2023

Proximity: Bridging the Gap Between Our Communities and Our Incarcerated Population

Maddi Briguglio AZ

Maddi Briguglio received her Bachelor of Science degree in Criminology and Criminal Justice and her Master of Arts degree in Criminal Justice from Arizona State University. She is now the Director of Operations for the Inside Out Network, working to improve the reentry connection process in IL, AZ, OR, and MS. She also teaches for the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice at ASU.

PROXIMITY BREEDS CARE. CARE BREEDS COMPASSION. COMPASSION BREEDS CHANGE.

If we want to truly reform our criminal justice system, we must focus on proximity; bringing people closer to the issues we care about. It is easy for someone to ignore what is not close to them. Someone without lived experience, whether it be their own incarceration, a justice-impacted family member, or simply growing up in a neighborhood where incarceration was common will not think as much, if at all, about those reintegrating into society after prison. These issues are far from their lives and do not seem urgent for them to fix. The question becomes not just "How do we get more people to care about the issues we see in our system?" But, more specifically, "How can we close the distance between our communities and the incarcerated population? How can we help people feel closer to these issues, even if it does not impact their lives directly?"

We must improve proximity if we want to see change. Anyone and everyone can play a part in this advocacy. One of my previously incarcerated friends used to say, "The best thing we can do for change, is to do well. Inside or outside (of prison), if we are doing well, we give them no choice but to give us a second chance." For more information about how to work toward this, I strongly encourage some reading on Desistance and the key components that contribute to one leaving a life of crime. For those at university who are studying these issues, keep learning and listening. Truly understand why a person chooses to commit crime and what contributed to their journey. Criminal behavior is often a symptom of

underlying issues and if we can think "people first, human first," we can effectively advocate for our incarcerated population, and work toward fixing what led an individual down this path to begin with. Continue your education by listening to those with lived experience. Put yourself in a position to learn from them.

As for other members of the community - you are already off to a great start of being open-minded and open-hearted by reading this magazine. That is the best place to begin. Odds are, the far reaching impact of the criminal justice system is much closer than you think. It is amazing what you may find in your close circles if you extend support. The biggest thing you can do is provide opportunity. If you are a business owner, a hiring manager, or on a community housing board, you can offer second chances to returning citizens.

I will leave you with something an incarcerated individual told me, "*No matter how much work we do on ourselves, how many classes we take, certificates we receive, or how much programming we complete…no matter how healed we become, if the community is not open to us coming home and is not willing to give us a chance, none of it matters.*" I challenge you to find a way to close the proximity. Bring people closer to these issues so that our communities are more open-hearted to second chances and more welcoming to people coming home. That is where real change and transformation can occur.

Public Defenders or Prosecutors in Disguise

Sterling Hospedales

Sterling Hospedales is the Executive Director of 25x4. 25×4 is an organization dedicated to supporting individuals affected by the criminal justice system. Our mission is to reduce barriers to employment and provide a faster path to meaningful careers for those with conviction histories.

Public defenders serve a critical function within the justice system. They ensure that defendants who cannot afford private counsel still have legal representation. Their responsibility is to protect the rights of the accused, provide competent defense, and uphold the integrity of justice. However, a troubling trend has emerged. Whether inadvertently or due to systemic pressures, public defenders may sometimes be aiding prosecutors in securing convictions rather than protecting their clients. This article explores this contentious issue and examines systemic flaws that contribute to ineffective defense.

Public defenders are tasked with representing indigent defendants and are expected to perform at the same level as private attorneys. They must act in the best interest of their clients, challenge the state's case, and work to ensure a fair trial. However, contradictions arise when public defenders seem aligned with the state. Overwhelming caseloads, lack of resources, and systemic pressure can undermine the ability of public defenders to provide vigorous representation.

In some instances, defendants feel their public defenders are not adequately challenging the prosecution's case, which leads to unjust convictions and harsh sentences.

One notable example is the case of Terrance Richardson and Ferrone Claiborne (United States v. Claiborne) who were wrongfully convicted of murdering a police officer in Virginia. Their public defenders failed to contest the absence of crucial forensic testing or consider alternative suspects. Both defendants pled guilty under duress through Alford pleas despite glaring flaws in the state's case, resulting in life sentences. Similarly, Archie Williams spent 37 years in prison for a crime he didn't commit (State v. Williams). His public defender failed to cross-examine key witnesses or investigate exonerating evidence. His wrongful conviction was a direct result of ineffective representation.

Public defenders are often burdened with overwhelming caseloads. Some handle more than 200 felony cases and 400 misdemeanors annually, far exceeding

recommended guidelines. This leaves little time for thorough investigation client communication, or proper trial preparation. They have fewer resources compared to prosecutors, who have access to police investigations, expert forensic analysts, and highly funded staff, making it difficult for public defenders to mount a robust defense. Furthermore, conflicts of interest can arise when public defenders are frequently working in the same courts where they are paid by the state and have close relationships with prosecutors.

When public defenders fail to challenge evidence, neglect investigations, or pressure defendants to plead guilty, the consequences can be severe: wrongful convictions, excessive sentencing, and missed opportunities for appeal. This issue disproportionately affects vulnerable communities that rely on public defenders for legal representation. Moreover, when defendants do not trust their public defenders, trust in the judicial system is deeply undermined. This growing lack of confidence calls for comprehensive reform to restore faith in the system.

To address these issues, significant investments are needed to enhance the quality of public defense. Policies should be enacted to limit caseloads, ensure regular mandatory training, and establish independent review boards to monitor public defender performance. Judicial review boards and bar associations should hold consistently underperforming public defenders accountable through measures such as retraining or, in extreme cases, disbarment. Strengthening the public defense system in these ways will help restore justice and ensure that indigent defendants receive fair trials.

While public defenders are vital in ensuring justice for all, systemic breakdowns sometimes result in their unintentional participation in wrongful convictions. Inadequate defense can lead to unjust sentences, which disproportionately affect marginalized communities. To restore fairness, we need systemic reform, increased investment, and measures for accountability to ensure public defenders can provide effective and unbiased representation. Our nation needs to be able to trust our justice system again.

Stories from the Field: The Heat Behind these Prison Walls

Michelle Jack Llosa

Michelle Llosa is the Community Engagement Paralegal at the Florida Justice Institute (FJI). To learn more about this case, Wilson et al v. Dixon et al and their other work visit www.fji.law/what-we-do or write to FJI at: Florida Justice Institute, 40 NW 3rd Street, Ste 200. Miami, FL 33128.

"I can't breathe."
"We live in the H dorm, also known as the Hell dorm because of how hot it gets."
"I get so hot, and I get so sick, that in the morning I can't get out of bed. My friend has to encourage me to get up, saying, 'I'm not going to let you die…' When it's this hot, I don't even want to eat; I don't want to move."[1]

These quotes are collected from individuals imprisoned and suffering within the walls at Dade Correctional Institution (Dade CI), a prison of the Florida Department of Corrections located in Homestead, Florida. Their statements, submitted collectively as declarations in support of a Motion for Class Certification, while unique to each individual, carry a unifying message—it is inhumanely hot inside these prison walls.

Temperatures across the United States are soaring, particularly in the summer months. South Florida is no exception. From May through September, the average temperature regularly exceeds 80 degrees, with highs in the upper 90s. As many Floridians understand, it is not just the temperature but also the humidity.

Since opening its doors in September of 1996, Dade CI has never had air conditioning in the prison dormitories. Exhaust fans break frequently and do not provide adequate circulation. Florida has an aging prison population, and that is particularly true at Dade CI. There are men in their 60s and 70s—many who have been in the Florida prison system for over 20 years.

The effect of rising temperatures on their health is detrimental and deadly in some cases. As documented in their individual declarations, many suffer from medical conditions typical for their age, like high blood pressure, cardiovascular disease, and arthritis. Many of them have developed debilitating breathing ailments like asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) over time. They require the use of a Continuous Positive Airway Pressure (CPAP) machine to sleep at night.

One person shared the very real struggle of trying to keep his CPAP mask on and hoping for at least 2-3 hours of uninterrupted sleep at night when the air feels thick and fiery:

"I have been diagnosed with sleep apnea. I need to use a CPAP machine to sleep. However, when it's hot like it is all summer long, it's very difficult to use the machine. That is because the mask attached to the machine requires a seal over my nose and mouth in order to function correctly. But when it's this hot, my face gets covered in sweat, so I can't get a seal. As a result, the machine makes gurgling sounds, and water accumulates on my face. It goes into my mouth, making me feel like I am being waterboarded. Also, the CPAP machine gives off heat, making me even hotter. For these reasons, it's very difficult to use the CPAP machine in the summer. And without the machine, I can't breathe at night."[2]

This man relies on a machine, which he must plug into a wall of a room with 80 other men sleeping in bunk beds, to help keep oxygen flowing so that he can sleep at night. A machine that is keeping him alive but doesn't work properly because it is just too hot.

There's no relief.

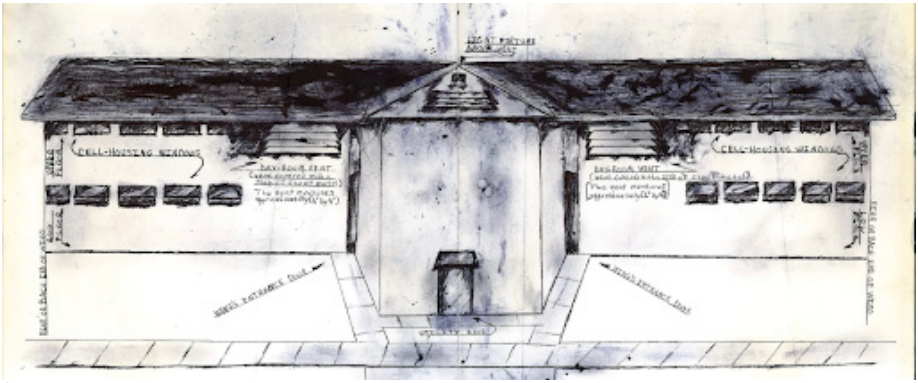
I was born and raised in Miami. I find comfort in the warmth and appreciate that the climate in Florida is desirable. But when I am outside during the summer months, I seek refuge in a refreshing iced drink, a cold pool or beach to swim in, or an air-conditioned restaurant or store to cool off in. When I get ready for bed at night, I adjust the air conditioning in my home so that I can sleep comfortably. Air conditioning is not a luxury. Ventilation is not a creature comfort. These are necessities in South Florida.

As a matter of fact, the Florida legislature previously recognized that some elderly people were experiencing inadequate care due to high temperatures and mandated that nursing and rehabilitation facilities be equipped with air conditioning. The legislature subsequently required the integration of generators into these facilities so that even during a natural disaster or loss of power, the facility can operate the essential functions like breathing machines and air conditioning.

Why then does our legislature fail to apply these regulations for the very facilities run by our largest state government agency? Many people at Dade CI would be eligible for retirement in a nursing home if they were not imprisoned. Due to their debilitating medical needs, many would be considered high risk at these facilities.

It must end.

On October 31, 2024, the Florida Justice Institute (FJI) filed a lawsuit against the Florida Department of Corrections for ignoring pleas of relief from the dozens of people who suffer and have fallen ill due to the insufferable conditions. The lawsuit was followed by a motion asking the court to certify the people at Dade CI as a class. The request for class certification was accompanied by declarations from a medical expert, an expert in meteorology, and 11 personal statements written by our clients whose voices are leading this charge to bring about change at Dade CI. I am incredibly proud to stand alongside them and my colleagues at FJI to challenge this unconstitutional treatment of the most vulnerable among us.



[1] Statements gathered from declarations submitted in support of Motion for Class Certification in the case, Wilson et al v. Dixon et al, case no. 1:24-cv-24253-PCH.

[2] Declaration of Marc Silvis, exhibit 10 to Motion for Class Certification, Wilson et al v. Dixon et al.

Navigating Conversational Adversities as a Formerly Incarcerated Person on the Outside

Elliott W. Adams, M. Ed.

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Elliott W. Adams is a doctoral candidate at the Riley College of Education at Walden University. He is an educator, instructional designer, and expert committed to feature-focused articles on helping people who are justice-involved find their path to a better quality of life.

Not everyone on the outside will treat you with humanity, compassion, or love. There may be challenges when people learn you were previously incarcerated. You may face judgment and be viewed as inferior. The lack of opportunity to present and express your vision can be disheartening and influence your mental health. Navigating such conversations requires resilience and strategy.

Your story can be embarrassing and reflect a dark period of your life. However, it's your narrative. Take control of it. Highlight where you are in life and where you want to be. Address choices you have made in the past and redirect any conversation that only wants to focus on your past. Remember, there is a difference between where you live and where you rest. Acknowledge that you have made mistakes, but avoid detailing the mistakes you have made and how you made them. People do not have to learn about who you were before you became the person you are now.

Avoid or maneuver around negative people in real life. Some people may take actions to deliberately disrupt your progress. Be on the lookout for anyone trying to prevent you from achieving your goals and make necessary adjustments to avoid the negative influence of their actions against you. Know the ledge or know and understand your limitations. American Hip Hop Artist Rakim's song from the 1992 movie Juice suggests that we understand where our boundaries are, when to stay within those boundaries, and when to exceed those boundaries if necessary.

Here are some of my suggestions for knowing your limitations and when to exceed your expectations:

Find Give-and-Go-Getters. These are people who see what you are trying to accomplish and help pave the way for you to achieve your goals. Give-and-go-getters are nice, helpful, ambitious people who not only want to succeed themselves but also want to help and see you succeed.

Do normal stuff: Live your life. Give yourself permission to relax and take care of yourself when you need to. As a person who was formerly incarcerated, sometimes I feel dirty and like there is an invisible black cloud over my head with rain, thunder, and lightning following me. This is all a part of the silent suffering or suffering in plain sight (SIPS) from housing

insecurity, child support debt, supervision debt, prolonged unemployment, and other social determinant stressors. Add these to the recurring thoughts of going back to jail or prison, that at any moment, I could be arrested for breathing. Metacognition is a term that identifies a person thinking about one's thinking. Also known as self-talk. I use self-talk to affirm myself and when my negative thoughts may overwhelm me at times. At the end of every day, I must LIVE. I can be my worst enemy or my greatest ally. The decision is mine.

Guard your personal information and refrain from oversharing: As a person on the outside, your personal information may be out in public and especially on the Internet. You cannot control already-released information. It is okay to keep your business private, sharing what you decide on a need-to-know basis. You are not obligated to share your information with anyone, it is privileged. You may be made to feel compelled to share, whether it's your desire or someone trying to talk information out of you. In specific situations, like applying for employment, being honest and framing how you have overcome past circumstances is always the best approach.

Life on the outside differs from your time on the inside. A friend on the inside, a former Marine, taught me to adapt and overcome any challenges. My challenges began immediately with my release. More than five years after release, I still faced challenges, but I learned how to adapt and overcome them by continuing to press. Ask difficult or uncomfortable questions. Ask for help. Be selective about who you trust. DO NOT QUIT in getting your life back together. Be encouraged.

From Badge to Blackboard: A Journey of Service and Second Chances

Orlando Roman

Professor Orlando Roman is a social work educator and former law enforcement officer with over a decade of experience in criminal justice, youth advocacy, and community leadership. He currently teaches at the University of Central Florida's School of Social Work, where he prepares future social workers to address systemic inequities. A passionate supporter of prison education, Orlando believes in second chances, compassionate service, and the transformative power of learning.

At the age of 19, I began my career in the criminal justice system as a Corrections Officer with the Florida Department of Corrections. I was young, determined, and committed to the idea of public service. By the age of 22, I transitioned to Orange County Corrections Department, where I helped supervise the Orange County Booking & Release Center—a position that introduced me to the daily churn of individuals entering and exiting the system. I didn't fully realize it then, but I was beginning to witness the cyclical nature of incarceration and the systemic failures that too often funnel people back through those same doors.

In the early stages of my career, I sought meaning beyond the institutional walls. Serving on the Florida Council on Crime and Delinquency gave me a new sense of purpose. Working on initiatives to reduce recidivism among at-risk youth revealed a simple but profound truth: people—especially young people—need hope, connection, and opportunity. That revelation stayed with me.

After eight years in Corrections, I joined the Orlando Police Department. As a Law Enforcement Officer, I focused on community policing and youth outreach—engaging in programs such as Operation Positive Direction and serving as a District Youth Liaison through the City of Orlando's Youth Connect Program. These roles were less about enforcing laws and more about building trust within our community. I worked with young people navigating difficult circumstances, many of whom reminded me of individuals I'd encountered in correctional facilities. I began to see my role not just as an officer of the law, but as a mentor, advocate, and connector. But the more I saw, the more I felt pulled toward something deeper.

My journey took a decisive turn when I left law enforcement to become a Program Director within Orange County Government. As the Program Manager of the Orange County Youth Shelter and later the Community Action Division's Low-Income Households, Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), I partnered with agencies

such as Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, Department of Children and Families, and the Florida Network to support runaway, homeless, and system-involved youth. These experiences grounded me in the realities that policies alone cannot heal broken systems—change requires empathy, prevention, and people willing to act upstream.

That's when education called me.

In 2023, I began teaching social work courses at the University of Central Florida, School of Social Work. I've taught courses, such as Macro-Level Roles & Interventions, Human Behavior in the Social Environment, and Perspectives on Social Justice. My students—future changemakers—challenge me to think bigger. They push back. They reflect. They ask, "Why is it this way, and how can we do better?" Their curiosity has always fueled my own. In 2025, I made the leap to full-time academia, not because I wanted to leave practice behind, but because I saw how education could multiply impact across our communities.

I'm proud of the roles I've held—officer, supervisor, mentor, director, and now educator. But titles aren't what drive me. What motivates me is the belief that people deserve second chances. That individual transformation is real. That grace and accountability can—and must—coexist in a just society.

This is why I support the Florida Prison Education Project (FPEP). I truly believe that education is liberation. It is the bridge between who we were and who we can become. I've witnessed firsthand how learning can reignite dignity and restore a sense of self-worth in individuals society often overlooks. And I've also seen how systemic obstacles—poverty, racism, untreated trauma, and disconnection—stack the odds against people before they even have a chance.

Yet, despite it all, people persist. They hope. They grow. That's the part that keeps me going.

Whether serving on the 9th Circuit Juvenile Justice Advisory Board or mentoring young people through the YMCA Achievers Program, I carry the stories of those I've served with me. They remind me that none of us are defined solely by our worst day or decision. We are shaped by our capacity to evolve.

In one of his most enduring calls to conscience, President Abraham Lincoln once urged the nation to be guided by "the better angels of our nature." I believe we still can. But it requires more than intention—it demands investment in people, in communities, and in education behind and beyond the walls.

To those impacted by incarceration, to those working to heal and rebuild, and to those who teach with heart: **your work matters. Your story matters.**

And we rise together when we believe that no one is beyond redemption.

In the Blink of An Eye

Imani Lewis

Imani Lewis is currently incarcerated in Delaware. She is a student in Widener University's Inside-Out Program, where students and professors from the Delaware Law School go inside a local correctional institution to exchange ideas about crime, justice, and incarceration. She wrote the following poem as part of her Spring 2025 coursework.

In the blink of an eye, everything changes. Bright lights, yellow lights and no more daisies.

Now I wonder, will I ever be the same?

Cares and thoughts go out the window. No more pillow talk, or freedom. My whole life is in limbo.

Answer my prayers dear Lord. I can't take this torture another day.

Reminiscing on the day I saw the sun shining, trees so green and hills a-climbing.

Crying now as all I see, and feel is pain; actions from which I'll surely refrain.

Escape the thoughts of that horrid day, I can never seem to do; rain drops, tear drops no-more Jimmy-Choo.

Recollections, flashbacks, the nightmares, they're really true.

Asking God for forgiveness and praying his strength gets me through; as without his guidance, I'm just here singing the blues.

Time is all I have here but nothing that's really productive that I can do.

Enter into society, the citizens' judgement now I truly fear; ex-con, felon, just a couple new names you now bear.

Disappointed is my family, that I'm sitting, ended up here.

HOW TO GET INVOLVED

Florida Prison Education Project:
cah.ucf.edu/fpep

Florida Coalition for Higher Education in Prison:
cah.ucf.edu/fchep

Community Education Project:
stetson.edu/other/cep

Institute for Educational Empowerment:
mdc.edu/educational-empowerment

Exchange for Change: *exchange-for-change.org*

Florida Rights Restoration Coalition:
floridarrc.com

Total Restoration Transformation Center:
trtcenter.org

Operation New Hope: *operationnewhope.org*

Project 180: *project180reentry.org*

Formerly Incarcerated Convicted people & Families Movement: *ficpfm.org*

Florida Cares: *floridacarescharity.org*

Florida Department of Corrections:
fdc.myflorida.com

Promising people: *promisingpeople.com*

Support the Florida Prison Education Project:

cah.ucf.edu/fpep

For further information, please contact us

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FLORIDA PRISON EDUCATION PROJECT