

Executive Director’s Report: by Jim Smith

The Spiritus Prison Outreach has been awarded a Federal grant from the Bureau of Justice. We are one of 36 organizations in the country to be selected for this award. The following is an excerpt from the award letter: "On behalf of the National Reentry Resource Center, I would like to congratulate you on receiving a grant through the Second Chance Act (SCA) Program. SCA grants were in very high demand-only 8 percent of applicants received funding-so your selection reflects your organization's commitment to excellence". Our excellence is a reflection of the incredible staff, volunteers, residents, group members and an incredible supportive community that make the Spiritus Christi Prison Outreach a beacon of hope.

This grant represents a shift in society's thinking about men and women coming out of incarceration and returning to the community. Rather than seeing this difficult transition as a part of the consequences of criminal actions, we are realizing that it is in society's best interest to help men and women be successful in this transition. From a financial standpoint, to keep someone out of prison saves tax payers approximately \$32,000 per year. From a community standpoint, if we can help individuals be successful and not return to criminal activity we increase community safety. In addition, the positive impact of having a family and community member make changes in their lives provides hope to the next generation and gives peers the courage to follow the positive example. We are delighted to have been chosen by the Bureau of Justice for the awesome privilege and responsibility awarded through this grant.

Jim Dillon, a long time volunteer and Board Member of the Spiritus Christi Prison Outreach, is leading this grant initiative as the Reentry Program Coordinator. Jim's experience as a group facilitator, board member and mentor, along with his managerial and administrative skills from his career at Kodak have enabled him to quickly join the team and move this new opportunity forward. We are thrilled to have him as a member of the Spiritus Christi Prison Outreach Team. Jim will be coordinating our Volunteer Outreach efforts with a focus on offering the Spiritus Christi residential programs (Jennifer House and Nielsen House) to additional men and women in state and county correctional facilities. Currently the majority of our residents come from the Monroe County Jail. On December 23rd Ben Reese and Jim Dillon began a new group with the men in the Orleans Prison Reentry Unit. We have also received permission from Albion Prison to begin a group for women, which we plan to begin early in 2010. We are very pleased to be able to expand our outreach efforts through this grant and offer safe housing, support, structure and guidance to more men and women through our Nielsen and Jennifer House Residential Programs.

What’s in This Newsletter?

" Editor’s Note: With this issue of *The State of the Heart* we are introducing a new feature in the form of guest articles, pertinent to the criminal justice system, which will appear from time to time. The first of these articles, by Christina Swarms, appeared in the summer 2009 issue of the Innocence Project Newsletter. It is reprinted here with permission of the Innocence Project, www.innocenceproject.org "

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IN THEIR OWN WORDS

CHRISTINA SWARNS, DIRECTOR OF THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE PROJECT, NAACP LEGAL DEFENSE AND EDUCATIONAL FUND

African-Americans make up 13% of the general population, 40% of inmates held in prisons and jails, and 60% of people who have been exonerated through DNA testing. The Innocence Project collaborates with civil rights organizations, like the NAACP LDF, to promote racial equality in the justice system through litigation, advocacy and public education. The Innocence Project in Print recently sat down with Christina Swarns, a leading authority on issues of racial bias in the criminal justice system, to explore some avenues for change.



Innocence Project in Print: Anyone can become a victim of wrongful conviction, but it happens most often to people of color. Why do you think this is so?

Christina Swarns: I think those numbers speak to the continuing public perception of a link between race and criminality. Because we are constantly barraged with media images of black people as criminals, it's easier for Americans to overlook evidence of innocence when they're confronted with a person of color than when they're confronted with a white person.

IP: The Innocence Project pursues reforms that can prevent wrongful conviction. But it's much more difficult to apply a straightforward legislative "fix" for racism. How do you approach this, and how do you think we can do more?

CS: The Innocence Project is already doing some of this work by advocating for eyewitness identification reforms that can reduce the risk of cross-racial misidentifications. We need to get better policies and procedures cemented into police practices, and we need to be able to present evidence about the potentially distorting effect of identification procedures. We also need to make sure that people of color are not excluded from juries, and the Innocence Project could be advocating for more inclusive juries. The more difficult thing to reform is that mental connection between race and criminality.

IP: What are some current cases and initiatives you are pursuing?

CS: We hope that by exposing biased practices we'll force a change in policy. We're in the middle of developing a lawsuit that will expose differential treatment of people of color by a major city police department. We're actively litigating two death-penalty cases, both of which are in jurisdictions and counties in the South with entrenched cultural and racial biases. We're also litigating cases that challenge practices that keep black people off of juries, and, in one county, we have begun a project of educating the community about the importance of jury service.

IP: How does the Innocence Project's work help you in these efforts?

CS: The Innocence Project has given everybody - prosecutors included - reason for pause about what they're doing. You now have to wonder whether the case you are working on involves an innocent person. However, we also have to figure out how we can do better in cases without DNA, especially non-DNA cases where race is an issue, because those cases present a serious risk of wrongful conviction.

IP: People of color often lack the resources to hire top-notch defense attorneys, and they are outgunned by prosecutors who sometimes cross the line to secure convictions. What needs to be done to ensure that people of color have access to adequate defense?

CS: We need to create real and enforceable minimum standards for appointed counsel. People who are facing capital punishment need to have adequately trained, adequately funded, skilled lawyers who do all of the things that are laid out in the American Bar Association's guidelines. If you have the money to hire the lawyers and investigators and experts that you need, then the odds of receiving a death sentence are much, much lower. Unfortunately people of color are more likely to receive appointed counsel because they are also more likely to be poor.

"WE HAVE TO FIGURE OUT HOW WE CAN DO BETTER IN NON-DNA CASES WHERE RACE IS AN ISSUE, BECAUSE THOSE CASES PRESENT A SERIOUS RISK OR WRONGFUL CONVICTION."

- Christina Swarns

IP: Is criminal justice reform the next civil rights movement?

CS: Absolutely. For the African-American community, there are few things more tangible and immediately disruptive and damaging than the volume of black people that are swept into the criminal justice system and the collateral consequences that flow from incarceration. Do we need education? Certainly. Do we need to be able to vote? Absolutely. Do we need to have those rights equal and unfettered? Certainly true. But you have to be free to be able to do those things. Priority one must be the decriminalization of the black community.

IP: How have efforts to address racism in the criminal justice system evolved over the last several years? Are we still fighting the same battles, or has it shifted?

CS: The election of Barack Obama has thrown an interesting curveball into the conversation about race in general. First, we need to respond to the idea that this election means we're in a post-racial society, and that issues of race are no longer relevant. I invite you to walk through any criminal courthouse, jail or prison in this country and tell me that race is no longer relevant. We have to question whether the criminal justice policies we promote are actually keeping us safe. We have to talk about safety and community responsibility and engagement. The conversation is far more nuanced than it once was. □

" We encourage you to consider contributing such an article relevant to the criminal justice system, either from your own hand, or from a recent publication (with permission). If interested, please contact Stephen LaSalle at 585-330-1553"

Program Director's Report: by Judy Simser

January is a very exciting month at our Outreach homes, Jennifer House will celebrate eight years in the community on January 22nd. To date, it has welcomed 438 women and children. Nielsen House will celebrate two years in the community on January 15th and has welcomed 129 men.

Nielsen has become a great home for the men to return to after they have moved on. We have one alumnus who returns once a week to cook dinner for the current residents. Another returns three times a week to volunteer.

Jennifer House continues to be a very vibrant and active house full of love and laughter. One woman came home the other day, ran into the office and was very thankful that she had a safe place to return to, because she saw people from her old life who were trying to pull her back into that negative existence.

Both homes were full of love, laughter and joy over the holidays for our women, men, and children. To see their eyes sparkle like the lights on our Christmas trees was truly a joy for us all.

The staffs at our homes continue to be an inspiration to each and every resident. They are always willing to put down the endless paper work and just be with a resident whenever there is a need.

I am very thankful for all the support our programs receive from the community.

Spiritus Christi Prison Outreach Advisory Board	
James Ahearn	President, Multiple Sclerosis Society National Upstate NY Chapter (Ret.)
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Frank Staropoli	President, Staropoli Consulting, Inc.
Kathleen Tranelli	Vice President, Legal Division, Eastman Kodak Company (Retired)
<i>Newsletter Editorial Team</i>	<i>Steve LaSalle, Jim Smith, and Brad Preston</i>

SAVE the DATE: The Annual Spiritus Christi Prison Outreach Fundraising Dinner and Silent Auction will take place this year on Saturday, March 20th, at HarroEast in Rochester. For further information, please contact Sharon Castronovo at 585-288-0504