A WORLD WITHOUT PRISONS: IMPROVING PRISONERS' LIVES AND TRANSFORMING THE JUSTICE SYSTEM

Justice Now
Oakland, CA

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Justice Now Activist

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SUMMARY: **Cassandra Shaylor** and **Cynthia Chandler** founded Justice Now in 2000. They push hard for prison abolition while advocating for better health care and conditions for prisoners in California's two largest women's prisons. They prioritize the leadership of prisoners, and offer interns the opportunity to work and meet with women inside prisons to learn first hand about prisoners' human struggles as well as the policy implications of state sponsored violence. Their strategies include the following:

- **Conduct Legal Visits Inside Prisons to Expose and Challenge Human Rights Abuses**: Shaylor, Chandler and the Justice Now interns spend as much time as possible inside prisons to uncover human rights abuses and organize to challenge them. They build relationships with women inside and become the eyes and ears to the outside.

- **Build Leadership Among Prisoners**: Justice Now engages people in prison in the organization's work at every level. They also assist women who are already working as activists within the prisons.

- **Push the Prison Abolition Frontier:** While Justice Now helps to improve health care and other conditions, they oppose prison reformation efforts. Instead they push for prison abolition.

- **Spread a Vision of a World Without Prisons**: Through plays, music, oral histories and toolkits, the organization helps envision and promote a new approach to building lives, not locking people away.

Shaylor and Chandler, along with Justice Now interns and activists, describe their experiences in the following case example:

"IMPORTANT THINGS TO TELL"

Justice Now

Writer: Jonathan Walters
Co-researchers: Cynthia Chandler and Cassandra Shaylor (Award Recipients);
Bethany Godsoe and Erica Foldy (NYU/LCW)

In pushing initiatives to challenge inadequate health care and abusive conditions for women in California's two largest women's prisons, Cynthia Chandler and Cassandra Shaylor, believe it's imperative that the prisoners themselves drive the agenda, and they say they are regularly inspired by the willpower and tenacity of some prisoners when it comes to doing just that. "We were contacted recently by a prisoner who was really, really sick - she was on oxygen," says Chandler. "And I went to see her, and I think the prison was trying to cut our visit short because by the time I got to see her she had about five minutes of oxygen left in the bottle. But she said, 'I'm not leaving. I have things I need to tell you, important things.'"

What women prisoners tell paints a chilling picture of abusive conditions—inadequate and shoddy health care, pervasive sexual harassment and abuse, deep isolation and chronic loneliness in an environment that has nothing to do with rehabilitation and everything to do with warehousing. It is a story of prisoners not being told they have chronic diseases like Hepatitis C, of getting the wrong treatment or no treatment at all, of lonely and sometimes agonizing death away from family and friends, where guards sell needles to drug addicts but where even getting hygiene basics such as sanitary napkins is sometimes impossible.

As co-founders of Justice Now, Chandler and Shaylor have for the past three years been working at multiple levels, both inside and outside prisons, to positively impact prisoners' lives as well as transform the justice system itself. From working to win compassionate release for terminally ill prisoners, to supporting legislation aimed at getting women and men out of prison, to helping build the next generation of activists, the two have hewed to a fundamental principle: "We can't advocate for anyone until they tell us what they need," says Chandler, which is why both Chandler and Shaylor spend so much time in the two prisons talking to women. But working so intensely in such a frequently emotionally draining environment is a clear recipe for burnout. "We see some really terrible things," says Chandler. What keeps them going, both say, is "meeting the women inside and learning from them the real meaning of words like 'dignity,' 'honor,' 'perseverance' and 'strength.'" What also keeps them going, they say, is their two-tiered mission: To improve the lives of individuals and at the same time work to tear down a system that they see as only doing further harm to already damaged lives. They have no illusions that it is a very tough campaign to carry on.

They are not in the campaign alone, however. A hallmark of Justice Now is that prisoners are involved in the organization's work at every level; that the prisoners themselves are the leaders of the effort. Prisoners are active as board members—helping steer policy and strategy in tearing down what Justice Now calls "the prison-industrial complex"—and they are active in advocating for better day-to-day treatment within prison walls. In fact, in many cases, the women working within prison walls have taken it upon themselves to initiate action. Justice Now is simply there to lend a hand if women feel they need it. "Very often the women we work with are already activists within prison and seeking support from outside organizations—to provide research or information, help in publishing their writing or just in getting resources to help other people

inside," says Chandler. "We frequently see this radical sort of metamorphosis when people start learning how to help themselves. They become activists and leaders in their own right."

Reform is not the goal

For Chandler and Shaylor, their mission isn't ultimately to improve the health care for women in prison. They see prisons as inherently unhealthy places. Both would prefer to see a world without any prisons at all. They frequently split with other prison reform groups, because in the long run the pair isn't interested in improving conditions in prison, they are interested in getting and keeping women out of prison altogether. In fact one of the reasons why Chandler and Shaylor started Justice Now was that the traditional prison reform movement wasn't pushing the prison abolition frontier hard enough. "We were feeling like a lot of the work we were doing was reformist," says Shaylor, "and was about making conditions better, but in a roundabout way that was really functioning to strengthen the current system. We wanted to be very clear that that was something we weren't interested in doing."

For example, Justice Now came out against state legislation to create in-prison hospices for terminally ill prisoners. It put them at odds with others in the prisoners' rights community. But it was a stand that the leadership of Justice Now thought was necessary for some very fundamental and important reasons. "We knew that there would be no way to get compassionate release as an option for terminally ill prisoners if such facilities were created. We were also concerned that it wouldn't afford family members increased visitation, which is extremely important when you have a family member who is passing away," says Chandler. But what Justice Now was—and still is—arguing for were hospices *outside* of prison, says Chandler. "Without exception, all the women I talked to said it would be nice if they could die surrounded by people that they care about within the prison. But they also understood that if such a system were set up, that there would no longer be any hope of getting compassionate releases. And we were concerned that under such a system family members wouldn't be able to visit, wouldn't be able to be there when people passed away. Getting people out of prison allows for all that, it allows families to heal." As a result of the rift among prison reform versus prison abolition advocates, the hospice legislation failed. But Justice Now felt it was a stand worth maintaining, given that it was what prisoners themselves wanted—hospices outside of prison, not inside.

It's the sort of tough call, though, that Justice Now is used to making as it moves forward, using the terrible conditions they encounter in prisons not to argue for better treatment for women prisoners, but to end imprisonment of women altogether. The women that Justice Now deals with are "prisoners" not "inmates," Chandler and Shaylor are quick to point out. It is that ethic that they try to impart to those who have signed on with Justice Now, either through the organization's intern program or through the women prisoners that Justice Now has helped support as internal activists.

"Eyes and ears to the outside"

Interns who have worked at Justice Now say that the reason for the emphasis on prison abolition versus reform becomes very clear upon actually visiting women in prison, which is a significant part of the Justice Now intern experience. Unlike many other groups working on justice and prison policy, Justice Now makes it a policy to spend as much time as possible in prisons with prisoners. "They're not parachuting in getting information and then you never see them again,"

says a former Justice Now client and now activist and board member with Justice Now. "They go inside regularly. They build relationships. When going to prison becomes part of your life; when you work with female prisoners and they become not your clients but your colleagues--your partners--that makes you a different kind of advocate. And they hear out of the prisoner's mouth what the situation is. And they become the eyes and ears to the outside."

It's that sort of inside/outside approach that makes Justice Now not only effective but also very credible. "One moment they're in prison meeting with women, the next they're testifying before the state Senate to get laws changed."

It is an approach, though, that takes its toll. Frequently what Justice Now activists and staff see and hear when they're in prison are tough, often drawn out tales of real human tragedy. "I visited one woman, and I was her first visitor in seven years," says a former Justice Now intern. "Seven years. She had never been to the visitors' room before, never knew that you could buy popcorn and Snickers bars and other food that prisoners can't get otherwise. And I was buying her stuff and tears were streaming down her face. I was stunned that a woman can be in prison for seven years and never get a single visitor." Adding to the tragedy, the woman had never been told by prison authorities that she had Hepatitis C, a chronic and potentially life-threatening liver condition. It wasn't until the intern asked for the prisoner's medical records that the information was revealed. "The whole thing was unbelievable," says the intern, who has worked on Justice Now cases involving everything from trying to get prisoners on to organ transplant lists, to keeping terminally ill women out of prison.

While it may be tough going, it also makes the internship experience incredibly powerful, says another former Justice Now intern. "Giving students the experience of actually going inside a prison and working on individual cases really gets them plugged in. It's much easier to get invested when you know the people inside and have a stake in what happens to them." But the sadness and misery they witness is something very real that she wasn't necessarily ready for, she adds. "It's a skill set they don't teach you in law school, how to do public interest work but also take care of yourself, set a boundary so that you don't take too much of it home with you; that you don't just suck up all the grief and the trauma of the lives of the people you're trying to help."

"Like a Spark"

If the work is hard, the rewards can be substantial, say Justice Now activists. And there's no more gratifying event than when a Justice Now client who has been active on prisoner health issues on the inside is released from prison and becomes an activist on the outside. "It was like a spark," says a former prisoner for whom Justice Now won early release, arguing for leniency in part based on her previously clean record, her poor health and also the difficult life circumstances that led to her arrest and imprisonment. "And it turns a negative into a positive. Also, I think it fosters a special kind of leadership. I remember working with my first client and because I'd been in trouble, I was able to say to her, 'O.K., here's how to turn a negative into a positive; here's how to turn what you're dealing with into activism.' And I went through it myself, and I'm proud I went through it because now I'm able to help someone else."

It is that ability to so profoundly impact someone's life that ultimately makes the work at Justice Now so satisfying. "It was like, 'Wow, given the resources, given the training, given the time, you can actually win these cases," says a former intern. "You can actually make this enormous

difference in someone's life. You can make the difference between her dying at home with her family around her or alone in a prison cell."

Hard work ahead

Since founding Justice Now in 2000, Chandler and Shaylor have helped win compassionate release for 20 prisoners. They've taught prisoners' families how to be active themselves in winning the release of loved ones. They've worked with a variety of community and justice groups against inhumane conditions in prison and for reform of sentencing laws. They've helped build underground, in-prison, peer education programs focusing on diseases such as HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis C. They helped organize the first in-prison legislative hearings ever held to investigate conditions in women's prisons in California.

Mostly, though, they have worked to raise the consciousness of a culture that seems bent on locking problems away rather than trying to figure out a way to offer people a better life to begin with. To that end, Justice Now has created its "Building a World Without Prisons" campaign, which involves multiple mechanisms for advocating for a new approach to criminal justice in the U.S. Through plays, music, oral histories, an anti-prison violence toolkit and a website (www.jnow.org), the organization is trying to spread the vision of a world that relies on neither police nor prisons, but on a compassionate and common sense approach to building lives rather than locking people away.

If that is an organizational message that sounds tough to sell and sustain to a mainstream caught up in punishment and retribution, one of the Justice Now activists offers a down-to-earth version that just might get people's attention. "It's the difference between the son whose mother can hold him and the son who never sees his mother—or only sees her through a glass partition. You know, if your mama went to jail, you're bound for jail, too." If Justice Now had its way, women would not be in prison, they would be holding their children and offering hope to a whole new generation through a justice system that addresses all forms of violence, including violence by the state. This would be a justice system shaped by the people most vulnerable to oppression.

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