

The Fire Inside

Newsletter of The California Coalition for Women Prisoners
1540 Market St., rm 490, San Francisco, CA 94102
www.womenprisoners.org
Issue Number 38, Summer-Fall 2008

Caring
Collectively
for
Women
Prisoners



For many of us, inside and out, life is a lot more than our immediate individual physical existence. Spirituality, most often expressed as religion, is a recognition of a connection with something outside ourselves. Many forms of asserting this fundamental aspect of our existence as human beings are either warped or outright denied in prison.

This issue of *The Fire Inside* is dedicated to those inside who practice a spirituality that celebrates life and offers affirmation and community in the face of enormous odds.

The many forms of spirituality inside

I am non-dominational. Having a faith while in prison gives hope. We all need something bigger than us. When all you have is yourself, and you can't handle the situation, it leads to anger, to suicide. By having a spiritual belief you can ask for help: from a power bigger than yourself, and maybe even from other people with whom you pray. Prayer can lead to a different relation with other people.

Guards want to be God, they are the final authority. But you can't be God just by shutting a gate.

•

At CCWF, when I first stepped onto the grounds of the Native American Indian Lodge I was saddened by the lack of religious rights towards Native Americans.... The ability to practice our religion makes a big difference to us. When I first came to [prison], my spirit was dark. Attending sweat lodge ceremonies helped me become a person I want to be, one that cares about others. That is why I want to fight for our rights at CCWF.

•

My belief system is pagan and I have to fight to be able to practice. We had to file a 602 three years ago to get pagan books. That raised the issue of our right to practice our religious beliefs and we won then. We established a Wiccan program at CCWF. Since then we had a couple more 602's about violations of our religious rights: illegal searches and seizures of our religious material and harassment.

•

Spirituality is a personal thing. My family is Christian. I believe our lives are destined. There has to have been some reason for my life to unfold as it had, for me to come to prison, to spend so much time here.

•

Spirituality is very different than organized religion. The women I grew up with were very spiritual, though not much for church.

•

Spirituality is what keeps us going. There are religious people who are no better for it. Others don't belong to a Church, but are very spiritual, connected.

On the Row we can't go to church. Spiritual advisors have to come to us, they have to stand on the other side of the cage. Some don't have clearance to come here.

continued on page 11

The Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution prohibits the government from discriminating against religious beliefs or placing restrictions or penalties on religious practices.

In the prison setting, restrictions on religious practices will be upheld as valid regulations if they are “reasonably related to the legitimate penological interests” of the prison. This is known as the Turner “reasonableness” test. (See, *Turner v. Safley*, 482 U.S. 78 (1987)). However, Turner does not apply to all prisoner claims of violations of religious freedom or freedom of speech.

More stringent tests are applied when a prisoner challenges state prison regulations under the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act (RLUIPA) or federal prison regulations under the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA).

Restrictions on religious rituals, services and ceremonies, holiday observances, religious literature, religious objects and accessories, grooming and attire, and religious diets can be challenged under the Free Exercise Clause and/or the RLUIPA/RFRA. For example, prisoners demanding adjustments of their work schedules so that they could observe the

Sabbath have generally been successful in challenging the restrictions. (See, *Conyers v. Abitz*, 416 F.3d 580 (7th Cir. 2005)) Also, prisoners have successfully challenged restrictions on the purchase

with “food items containing 2,200 calories” daily during Ramadan. (See, *Couch v. Jabe*, USDC W.D. Va., Case No. 7:05-cv-00642-PMS (Sept. 22, 2006))

The Establishment Clause of the First Amendment can be violated when a government policy or practice: (1) has no secular purpose; (2) the primary effect is to advance or inhibit religion; or, (3) fosters an entanglement in religion. In other words, requiring a prisoner to participate in a religious-based or faith-based program so that his/her classification status is lowered or as a parole eligibility requirement,

violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment.

In California, there are several sections of Title 15 that address religious issues; see sections 3053 (food for religious events), 3054 (religious diet program), 3054.¹ (religious vegetarian diet), 3054.² (Jewish Kosher diet), 3210 (establishment of religious programs), 3211 (inmate ministers), 3212 (scheduled services), and 3213 (stipulations regarding religious artifacts, sanctuaries, and sacramental wine).

Footnotes:

1. 42 U.S.C. section 2000cc, *et seq.*
2. 42 U.S.C. section 2000bb, *et seq.*



and possession of religious texts even when those books were about “unfamiliar” or unpopular views such as Wicca and atheism (See, *Kaufman v. Schneider*, * F.Supp.2d_, 2007 WL 521218 (W.D. Wis. Feb. 15 2007) (see, also *O’Bryan v. Bureau of Prisons*, 349 F.3d 399 (7th Cir. 2003)). In order to restrict religious books, prison officials must show that the books advocate violence and threaten the security of the institution. With regards to religious diets, a Muslim prisoner settled his case against the Virginia Department of Corrections in 2007. In that case the court held that the prison must provide the prisoner

Muslim inside and out

Hamdiya Cooks, Director of CCWP

CCWP first met Hamdiya Cooks, our outgoing Director, through her work organizing and advocating for the rights of Muslims and all prisoners while she was inside. *The Fire Inside* had the opportunity to talk with Hamdiya (HC) about her experience of being a Muslim woman in prison and reentering the community.

FI: What led to your spiritual change?

HC: I became a Muslim inside. I knew right from wrong growing up. Going to prison gave me the chance to reflect on what I was doing wrong and connect with a higher power. This helped me to make changes.

I was introduced to the Nation of Islam (NOI) by a family friend before I went to prison, but I did not accept it. When I went to prison I was treated by a doctor who was Muslim. He had a Holy Qur'an in his office and I saw it when I was getting a physical exam. He loaned me his Qur'an and said he would talk with me after I read it.

I returned to the doctor's office after I read the Holy Qur'an, we discussed it and he welcomed me into Islam. He gave me the Shahada, the public declaration of acceptance of Islam as my faith.

FI: What role did your faith play in sustaining you in the inhumane atmosphere of federal prison?

HC: It impacted every aspect of my life. Inside you have to have something to sustain you and fight being treated like "things." I could not have survived and come out healthy with a spirit willing to work, if it was not for my faith. My faith gave me the opportunity to become personally strong in my own right.

I changed in several ways. I had an incorrect assumption about the justice system. I thought if you were honest and did things that were right with your moral values and told the truth, that you would be alright. But I found very soon after my prison sentence that the system was corrupt and did not support truth. No matter who "did it," someone had to go down. It was so ugly, I vowed that I had to fight it and would never believe in this way.

My faith gave me strength to challenge a lot of the prison policies and procedures that continuously

treat you like you are not human and put in your mind, head, and heart that you cannot fight. My faith gave me the ability to fight, gave me the belief that I am a human being and have the right to be treated like one.

My faith became the catalyst for not allowing my spirit to be treated as lesser. I reacted for myself and acted as a leader in the Muslim community inside. It brought strength to the whole community inside.

FI: Was your faith important to you in terms of building a community?

HC: It was critical for me to build a community inside. We



were a community who struggled together, supported each other, prayed together. Not only did we challenge policy and procedures that tried to limit our abilities to practice our religion—such as wearing our head gear, praying during Ramadan, being served pork—we were a community. We challenged all the inhuman treatment, not only for the Muslim community, but others inside.

When Muslims came into the prison they knew they had a community immediately. In any unit they had supplies, Islamic materials, hygiene, and commissary. They knew they were coming into a neighborhood. My leadership helped build this kind of community.

FI: Given the "anti-terrorist" mania that falsely equates the Islamic religion with terrorism, how were Muslims treated in prison?

HC: The the main stereotype that I experienced was that Black Muslims do not like white people. Our immigrant sisters were looked at in a different light, always under suspicion, interrogated a lot, not respected, just trying to get through their sentence without hassles. But for African Americans, it was primarily this racial bigotry and profiling among administration.

Continued on page 10

La espiritualidad es usualmente identificada con la religión, pero algunos de nosotros pensamos que es algo que va más allá que eso. Para muchos, la espiritualidad significa tener un sentido de que nuestra humanidad es más que nuestra existencia física o individual. Para muchos de nosotros, adentro o afuera de la prisión, es la mayor parte de cómo define quienes somos, que nos conecta a unos con los otros, “el espíritu de nuestros tiempos”.

La espiritualidad tiene una larga historia de ser parte de la lucha de los pueblos por su sobre vivencia. Los esclavos africanos en los Estados Unidos usaban la espiritualidad como parte de su resistencia al esclavitud. La espiritualidad de los Pueblos Nativos ha sido una parte central de sobre vivencia y resistencia siempre desde que los europeos invadieron el Continente de Norte América. Cada religión, incluyendo la Wicca, el Islamismo y el Judaísmo, y otras más, tienen una historia de cómo la espiritualidad se ha sostenido durante una terrible opresión. La espiritualidad en nuestro más amplio sentido, es nuestra creencia en un mundo mejor, incluyendo la posibilidad de nuevas relaciones humanas en el aquí y el ahora.

Algunas mujeres, quienes no tenían una religión antes de estar en prisión, cambian a tener una religión. Otras se alejan de las religiones organizadas. Una mujer pregunto “Si hubo un Dios, porque seria tan duro tener

a alguien venir y representar a mi religión? Yo creo en el poder de la oración. La gente tiene algo sobre ellas que al mismo tiempo saca cosas al respecto, Pero no tiene que ser Dios”.

T “Sammy” Pierce dice “Cuando llegue por primera vez a la prisión, mi espíritu estaba bien oscuro, participando en las ceremonias de las cabañas de sudor me ayudo a ser la persona que yo quería ser, uno se cuida con los otros. Es por eso que yo quiero luchar por nuestros derechos en CCWF.”

El CDCR asigna un papel para organizar religiones cristianas: La prisión paga un capelán, tiene un espacio para una capilla, da permisos para el tiempo y movimientos para las funciones religiosas. A veces la única actividad que es aprobada por la prisión es la religiosa. El sistema de prisiones espera que las religiones organizadas refuercen la actitud de que la única solución para los problemas personales y la injusticia social es a través de Dios. Esta actitud puede desanimar a la gente para empoderarse así mismos y levantarse en contra de lo que no esta bien. Del otro lado, religión y creencia espiritual puede jugar un importante papel en el apoyo a la lucha por la justicia.

Mientras que las leyes mandan que todas las religiones y creencias sean respetadas en prisión, no es lo mismo para las religiones no cristianas, pues no tienen los mismos privilegios.

Las mujeres Musulmanas han sido segregadas aun más desde el 11 de septiembre del 2001, por un especial hostigamiento (ver la historia de mujeres Musulmanas organizadas en la prisión federal en pagina 3). La gente Nativa continúa peleando por el derecho a su religión (la cual ha sido notoriamente pisada) y ahora el Departamento de Operaciones Manuales (DOM) incluye una sección especial deletreando sus derechos.

Mujeres judías reportan fuertes penalidades por tratar de celebrar Chanukah, la fiesta de las luces. Un consejero espiritual mormon fue duramente acosado por los guardias, el estuvo muchas horas para entrar mientras los guardias estaban chequeando el teléfono y la dirección de cada iglesia en cada papel que el tenia.

En prisión, estar unidos en las actividades religiosas puede permitir a las personas experimentar el poder de la solidaridad humana sumado al hecho de la conexión a su poder superior. Como una persona en prisión dijo “Todos necesitamos algo más grande que nosotros, alguien a quien podemos llamar... Creer en algo o alguien muestra un esfuerzo de alcanzar algo más allá de ti.”

Esperamos que este número de *Fire Inside* abre la conversación sobre los diversos significados que la gente en prisión tiene sobre la espiritualidad.



Spirituality is usually identified with religion, but some of us think that it is something beyond that. For many, spirituality means a sense that our humanity is more than our individual, physical existence. For most of us, inside or out, it is a major part of how we define who we are, what connects us to others, “the spirit of our times.”

Spirituality has a long history of being a part of peoples’ struggles for survival. African slaves in the US used spirituality as part of resistance to slavery. Native peoples’ spirituality has been a central part of survival and resistance ever since the Europeans invaded the North American continent. Every religion- including Wicca, Islam, and Judaism among many others-- has a story of how spirituality has sustained its people during terrible oppression. Spirituality in the broad sense is our belief in a better world, including the possibility of new human relations in the here and now.

Some women who have not been religious before coming to prison, turn to religion. Others turn away from organized religion. One woman asked, “If there was a God, why would it be so hard to have someone come represent my religion? I believe in the power of prayer. People have something about them that brings things about. But it doesn’t have to be

God.”

T. “Sammy” Pierce said, “When I first came to [prison], my spirit was dark. Attending sweat lodge ceremonies helped me become a person I want to be,



one that cares about others. That is why I want to fight for our rights at CCWF.”

The CDCR assigns a role to organized Christian religions: the prison pays a chaplain, maintains space for a chapel, allows time and permits movement for religious functions. Sometimes the only activity that is approved by the prison is religious. The prison system hopes that organized religions will enforce the attitude that the only solution to personal problems and social injustice is through God. This attitude can discourage people from empowering themselves and standing up against what is wrong. On the other hand, religious and spiritual beliefs can play an important role in supporting the struggle against injustice.

While laws mandate that all religious beliefs be respected in prison, in fact non-Christian religions do not get the same privileges. Muslim women have been singled out even more since 9/11/2001 for special harassment (see story of Muslim women organizing in federal prison on page 3). Native people continue to fight for their religious rights (which have been notoriously trampled) and now the Department Operations’ Manual (DOM) includes a special section spelling out their rights. Jewish women report harsh penalties for trying to celebrate Chanukah, the festival of lights. A Mormon spiritual advisor was so badly hounded by the

guards--he once spent several hours waiting to get in while the guards were crossing out every church address and phone number on each piece of paper in his possession-- that he stopped coming altogether.

In prison, coming together through religious activities can enable people to experience the power of human solidarity in addition to their connections with a higher power. As one prisoner said, “We all need something bigger than us. Something we can call on, rely on.... To believe in something or someone shows an effort to reach beyond yourself.”

We hope that this issue of *The Fire Inside* opens up the conversation about the diverse meanings of spirituality to people living in prison cages. ■

Wiccans

Sara Olson, CCWF

Wicca is growing in popularity in the United States where there are now over a million practicing Wiccans. It is fluid in definition and decentralized organizationally. Solitary practice is common because of the undefined parameters of traditions. Wicca promotes ideals of quiet compromise, peaceful interaction with others and respect for the natural world, important qualities in the assaultive prison environment.

However, Wiccans are targets of human fears and ignorance that harken back to a time when great primeval forests covered much of the globe and humans cowered before a seemingly unexplainable, all-powerful nature.

The first Wiccan service at CCWF was held in November, 2004. It was the result of extensive lobbying by Wiccans Autumn Zuver, Shawna Hartmann (A.K.A. McCullough) and April "Twin" Watson. Patrick McCollum, California's prominent prison Wiccan chaplain, conducted the service with the aid of Fresno Wiccan, a High Priest known as "Doc". Although California men's prisons have had Wiccan chapters for over a decade, the meeting at CCWF was the first Wiccan gathering in a women's prison. Wiccan services continued regularly through 2005-2006. Two Fresno Wiccans conducted biweekly services and Patrick McCollum, accompanied by several others from the

Bay Area, came quite often. They offered educational classes and led circles of worship that gave Wiccan prisoners a sense of solidarity. Then another staff member replaced the associate Warden who had been making Wiccan services possible. Thereafter, Wiccan observances went downhill.

There is much resistance to establishment of Wiccan chapters within California prisons. "Witch" is a common epithet hurled at Wiccans. Rumors and accusations about the use of blood in rituals are spread even though this is expressly forbidden in the Wiccan religion. Despite these obstacles, more than 77 people attended Wiccan services held in June 2008 to celebrate the Midsummer solstice.

Patrick McCollum has a long-standing suit in court against CDCR for generally disallowing or interrupting the practice of the Wiccan religion in California prisons. The suit is based on thousands of pages of discovery from several prisons. At CCWF, Shawna Hartmann, aided by Moraga attorney Barbara McGraw, has filed suit against CCWF to request a Wiccan chaplain. She is currently seeking help from any non-profit, free world Wiccan organization or supporters that might be amenable to aid in financing Hartmann's suit.



Support Prisoners with Disabilities

Anyone who has ever been in prison or supported someone inside knows that prisons in the US are inhumane and often profoundly disabling. Whether due to no healthcare or bad healthcare, violence, stress, poor food and housing conditions, or aging inside, many people become disabled while in prison. Others who go in with a chronic illness or disability get worse...or do not survive prison at all.

What is the CRPD?

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is an

international treaty defining the human and civil rights of people with disabilities. Prisoners with disabilities are denied access to prison programs and health care, are forcibly restrained and medicated against their will, among other human rights violations. We, former prisoners and prison activists, ask you to support efforts to get the US Government to ratify this new convention. It can be an important tool for protecting prisoners' human rights. **Sign and distribute the petition to the US Ambassador to the United Nations.**

For more information:
UN Convention: www.un.org/disabilities/default.asp?navid=12&pid=150

CCWP, 1540 Market Street #490,
SF, CA 94102.
www.womenprisoners.org.
415-255-7036 ext.4

Stop Force, c/o Hazen,
340 Hudson Ave.,
Albany NY 12210.
www.stopforce.org
315-528-3385



Jail project's success

Nia Sykes

CCWP participates in a San Francisco jail project, which includes bi-monthly visits to the San Francisco women's jail. CCWP members are able to meet there with groups of approximately 25 women and transgender prisoners. We discuss issues of abuse and conditions of confinement in the jail, explore political education issues such as Violence Against Women and the Prison Industrial Complex, and create a space for women imprisoned in the jails to share their struggles in their lives both outside and inside the jails.

The jail project has allowed us to build more connections with women within the San Francisco jail system and deepen our understanding of the issues faced by people upon their release. Through our advocacy we have helped several women get into treatment programs instead of prison time. The majority of women are released to San Francisco where we encourage them to remain members of CCWP, building upon our membership of formerly imprisoned women.

A new awareness

Mary Shields, CCWF

My name is Mary Shields. I have been incarcerated for almost 20 years. I grew up in the Church, so I knew God from the beginning of my life. Like all young people, I could not wait to become of age so I could do what I wanted. My mother and grandparents were not having any of that. When the time came, I left on my own. I had no idea my life would end up like this.

I was sentenced to life in prison. Then I remembered everything my mother and grandparents told me. That at some point God was going to be the only one that was going to be there for me. That became so real.

I came to CCWF alone, hurt, angry and missing my 4 children

and the rest of my family. I knew I needed to change to make it out of this place. I needed a power that I myself did not have. I started to

Many bad things have happened to me since that night: I was diagnosed with cancer, my grandchild died, many of my family and friends have passed away, just 4 months ago I had major surgery. But through it all God has kept me and has made my spiritual walk stronger.

He has put a very special group of women in my life. These women are from CCWP. I call them my special angels. These women have so much love in their hearts for women in prison. When they come to visit me, it is as if my actual family are here with me.

They listen to me, they don't judge me, they just love me. Diana, Mary, Christie, Urszula and many more of these wonderful ladies that have been here for so many of us.

June 10, 2008



Mary with her daughter and two grandchildren, August 31, 2008

read my Bible and go to church. Then one day I had a breakthrough. In the stillness He said to me, "Mary, it's all about a new awareness in you." That night my life changed and a new personal history started for me.

CCWP organization and staff

At the beginning of September, Diane Hafsa Al-Amin joined CCWP as a full-time staff person. She will be working on our fundraising efforts, helping to coordinate the Sista 2 Sista visiting team, and being a part of all our program work. A former CCWP prison visiting team volunteer, Hafsa's interest in criminal justice is augmented by her successful 29 year marriage to a former San Quentin death row inmate.

She is an alumni of Women's Health Leadership (WHL), a Center for Collaborative Planning program, and a founding member of Mu'akhah, Inc. a SF Bay Area based non-profit agency designed to provide health related resources and education to underserved Muslim women and others experiencing cultural barriers to pub-

lic resources. She has extensive experience working with women in transition including incarcerated



women, women in substance abuse treatment and women survivors of domestic violence.

Currently an undergraduate, Hafsa is pursuing graduate studies

in Counseling Psychology. "In the end, the strength we need to save and heal ourselves is found deep inside, rooted in our own perceptions of ourselves. My personal mission is to help our sisters shine some light on those dark, fearful places that keep us constricted and unable to move forward. Knowing ones true and divine nature is the key to the acceptance of ourselves and finally others' acceptance of us." Hafsa plans to continue working with women on issues of mental health and self-sufficiency.

Our Outreach Coordinator, Nia Sykes (see *The Fire Inside* issue #37 for introduction), will now be working 25 hours a week with CCWP, continuing our work in the San Francisco women's jail and expanding our community outreach efforts. ■

My survival was being blessed with many friends

by Linda Fields

My name is Linda Field. I spent 19 years behind bars for killing my children's and my abuser, my husband. The pain of separation from my children cannot be described. It sticks to your bones and eats your guts. My survival came from our Lord.

Prison was a rude awakening. I had never been in any trouble before and didn't know what to expect. The only things I had to hang onto were my love for God and my children. My first prison was CIW. I was able to take college classes and Bible studies. I met some wonderful people there and was blessed with many friends. I wasn't allowed to have friends when I was married, so this was a wonderful experience. I joined Nikki Diamond in song and love of the Lord.

After 3 years, I was moved to CCWF. I continued Bible study. We held prayer groups. God gave me a new sister. Together we attended the Jewish Sisterhood. I learned more about Jesus' upbringing while Judith learned more about her beliefs. I was truly blessed with her, Esther, Annie, and several others.

God answers prayers in three ways: yes, no, or wait. You never know if it's no or wait, but He hears each and every prayer. No matter what you do, He will believe in you and never lose hope.

I was blessed with a date from the Governor, but more so from Free Battered Women who never gave up on me. Life on the outside isn't all easy. At this time I have been told that I must move, with nowhere to go. I know God is in control and will provide. I must be faithful to believe. People in the town I live are nice, but some are afraid of me because of my past. I won't judge them as they do me, but will pray that their eyes are opened.

I send my love and prayers for all of you behind bars. Know that those of us released will never forget you. God will not either.

Linda Field
P.O. Box 604
Downieville, CA 95936

Critical Resistance 10 Conference in Oakland

From Sept. 26 through 28th hundreds of prison rights activists, including former prisoners, family members and community activists, gathered at Oakland's Laney Community College. We shared experiences, learned from each other and made plans to continue working nation-wide for prisoner rights and to abolish prisons. The conference celebrated the 10th anniversary of Critical Resistance, and committed to continue working to dismantle the "prison industrial complex" (PIC)—all of the prisons, detention, policing and surveillance – used to "solve" the problems brought on by racism, poverty, homelessness, and sex, gender and disability oppression.

The weekend included hundreds of workshops, a film series, regional meetings and cultural performances—dance, theater, spoken word and drumming. Workshops addressed issues such as political cases of the SF 8, the Jena 6 and the New Jersey 4, and the US government's Counterinsurgency Program (COINTELPRO), and issues of youth incarceration, mental health inside, oppression of and support for transgender and gender variant people in prison. CCWP sponsored and participated in many workshops. Here is a summary of a few of them:

Caged Mental Health: Strategies for Resistance in Women's Prisons—CCWP started by bring-

ing the voices of women and trans prisoners into the workshop space. Former prisoners Hamdiya Cooks, Ida McCray, and Rahima Walker gave testimony about their experiences fighting to hold on to mental health while living in a cage. Nia Sykes spoke eloquently about the mental health impact of having her mother in prison for much of her



A cage that is CCWF's death row housing

childhood. And Xiomara Campos Cisne described the specific ways in which immigrant women prisoners deal with mental health abuse. After the presentations, others in the workshop shared their firsthand experiences of caged mental health, demonstrating that it is possible to overcome the damage of the prison environment even if it takes enormous courage, persistence and resistance.

Torture and Violence against Prisoners with Disabilities—CCWP joined with StopForce (a NY State organization working to end forced medical treatment for people with psychosocial / mental health disabilities), and Poor Maga-

zine to document prison abuses and strategize about how to best defend the rights of prisoners with disabilities. We heard testimony from Michael Manning, an African American man with disabilities, unjustly convicted and incarcerated in Pennsylvania; words from women from CCWF and VSPW; and from Martha and Lily, a mother and daughter representing the Parents Assoc. Of Youthful Offenders in Pueblo, CO, testifying about abuses of a family member and other youths. This workshop also initiated work to educate and ratify the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (see page 6).

Coalition Building to Stop the Prison Industrial Complex—

The room was packed as representatives from CCWP, CURB, All of Us Or None, LSPC, Drug Policy Alliance, Youth Justice Coalition, Prison Moratorium Project and Families to Amend Three Strikes summed up the accomplishments of the last ten years and discussed the challenges of the coming decade. All agreed that in order to become more effective, we had to go beyond our individual organizations and come together as a genuine movement challenging the PIC. We also agreed that it was crucial for the communities most affected by the PIC be represented and supported in setting the agenda and participating in all aspects of prison abolition work.

■

A first visit

Amanda

It was the end of the line, a huge expanse of gravel. Vehicles lined up one after the other like a shopping mall. Like a deep dark secret hidden behind back roads in the heat of Central California.

What must we look like from up above? A Navy base in the shape of a swastika in bird's eye view? The immensity of the cages following each other up across the state like connect the dots? Tell me what image appears.

I can tell you what image appears. It is a locked door in front of you and behind you, and you, left wondering who you are, whom they are trying to keep in, whom they are trying to keep out.

I can tell you what image appears but it is more about what I hear. Injustice has never been as loud as the gates, as quiet as the tears of a woman inside.

It had always been the fences that were the worst part. In California, for me, I found it was all the fences

I couldn't see, the immensity of the land and the number of people on it.



My first visit to CCWF was not about the last names they shouted across the room but the stories piled on each other, peeling away and closing up again. It wasn't what they told us we couldn't bring in, but what I brought out with me inside, and what I carry today that adds weight to each step and hope and heaviness. It wasn't they, but us, and this coalition we have together, and the strength and beauty I found inside, bursting like berries off the vine, bitter and full.

Afterwards, I peel carrots and watch closely over the garbage can. Though just my fingers, it is important to keep myself intact. One slip, and I fear I'd fall apart. But I — I got to go home.

Muslim inside and out

continued from page 3

There was not really a problem between me and other prisoners.

FI: Many Muslims in the US are from the Black community. Do you think that racism contributes to the discrimination that Muslims face inside?

HC: Yes, one spills into the other. Muslims inside primarily came from the NOI and had an ideology that supported the belief that the white man is the devil. During the 20 years I was locked up (from early 80s to early 2000s) African American Muslims were often treated with racism and prejudice by older guards and administrators

who looked at you as anti-white. They wanted you to know who was in charge.

The racism was across the board to all African Americans, being Muslim was just the icing on the cake.

FI: Would you explain how your faith impacted your experience of getting out and re-integrating into the community?

HC: My Islamic beliefs contribute to my ability to be a leader and to be honest and forthright, to believe in justice, that we are all here for a purpose. And if we follow that inherent purpose, we are able to soar. I have found that my

trying to be the best Muslim I can be has given me the ability to work with other people, to accept other people, to improve all humanity, to all have an equal share in what God has provided the world. It gives me the discipline and faith that we can all move ahead together.

The help I received from Muslim volunteers that visited the prison, as well as my activist comrades, supported my growth and ability to change. Without a lot of support from the Muslim community I would not have been able to re-integrate as successfully.

Not a goodbye, a change in responsibilities

October 23, 2008

This letter is to my CCWP Family, our volunteers outside and our dear sisters and trans people inside.

Dear Family,

I resigned as the Director of CCWP effective September 1, 2008. I've been on a fantastic journey since my release from prison in June 2002 and my accepting the position as Director of CCWP in April 2005. Both CCWP and I are continuing to grow and move forward. My satisfaction comes from knowing that I'm leaving CCWP stronger and more prepared to tackle the goals we have set together.

As most of you know, I was incarcerated for 20 years in the federal prison system. Getting out of prison was certainly an incredible and gratifying experience for me, although bittersweet. Knowing how many people are still behind those walls and inside those cages continues to leave me incomplete. As long as there are women behind bars, part of me will always be inside. I think of you everyday of my life. I grieve over not being able to "do" as much as I know needs to be done.

Working in an environment that understands and supports incarcerated people has contributed to making my life outside worth living. I am humbled and honored to have worked for the California Coalition for Women Prisoners as well as to be a voice expressing your thoughts and feelings on this side of the prison wall. I have accepted the responsibility to represent CCWP as the Advisory Board chairperson. I do believe we all deserve opportunities to live healthy,

prosperous lives. I've been told that I'm a bit too optimistic at times, but without my belief, I would not be sitting here writing you. Please, hold on to your beliefs and be true to yourselves.

CCWP has a rich history that embodies the relationship between volunteers outside and those still behind the walls. Our dear founding member Charisse Shumate described our relationship like no other could: "*When I could not hear my mother's voice or be a voice to my son, it's people like you that have helped me believe that I'm not lost, forgotten or a walking dead.*" Her words ring true for me, even to this day. Outside volunteers helped me live my life while inside and also prepared me to live again outside of prison. I could not have done that without them. We worked together on programs and projects and I always felt respected as a human being with value. Our collaborative work is critical to the success of our lives inside and out.

CCWP has brought on two incredible women who I'm sure will continue to uphold the tradition that CCWP stands on. Hafsah Al-Amin is our new Development Coordinator and Nia Sykes is our new Outreach Coordinator. Please welcome them with loving arms and your ideas about the direction of our work together in these critical times. I want to thank you for allowing me to represent this remarkable organization. Keep your spirits strong and your life will follow.

Peace & Blessings,
Hamdiya Cooks
Former CCWP Director



The many forms of spirituality inside

continued from page 1

There needs to be more access to religious areas here. It brings peace of mind to attend to whatever your beliefs are. Yet they are always announcing "service cancelled" or "sweat lodge closed today."

Anger and frustration build here. Religious service gives you time to cleanse, to communicate

with others, with other prisoners and especially with people from outside.

•
Spirituality to me is a God able to help me move mountains and find strength I don't even know I have. At times, when others might not be available, He is. He can make seemingly impossible situations have possible actions.

The groups we have in the chapel now don't have an officer looking over us. It is just us trying to make it through this place and have a stronger sense of self through sharing things, sometimes pretty heavy things. Opening yourself up helps find freedom.

We are fighting for a forum to teach each other and to come together. ■

Precious Releases...

Christy Camp was released from prison after serving 19 years on a 16-years-to-life sentence for killing her abusive husband. This was the 2nd time that the Board of Parole Hearings had found her suitable for parole. Christy was just 14 years old when she met and married her 25-year-old husband, and 21 years old when she stabbed him after nearly seven years of physical, sexual, psychological, and economic abuse and control. She was one of 34 women who submitted clemency petitions to then-Governor Wilson with the help of Free Battered Women in 1992. Of the original 34 petitioners, she is the 19th to be released through parole, clemency, appeals, or *habeas* petitions. Three others have died in prison, and 12 remain imprisoned.

Brenda Clubine was released on October 22nd, 2008, after serving 26 years on a 16-to-life sentence. She originally had been convicted of 2nd degree murder for the death of her abusive husband. Due to a successful *habeas* petition under the law that the CA Habeas Project works to implement (PC Sec. 1473.5), Brenda's conviction was vacated and she instead pled

guilty to voluntary manslaughter. She was re-sentenced to 7 years in prison and finally released with credit for time served. Brenda is one of the founders of Convicted Women Against Abuse (CWAA), the longest-running support group for incarcerated battered women in California's state prisons.

Linda Anderson and **Brandy Tripp** both had their parole dates upheld by the Governor.

Outrageous Denials...

Governor Schwarzenegger again denied **Linda Lee Smith** who has been found suitable for parole 9 times! Linda remains hopeful and committed in her fight for freedom.

Thanks in part to Free Battered Women for the information on releases and denials of incarcerated survivors and to the women prisoners for the information we received about their own cases. WE INVITE OUR READERS TO SEND US INFORMATION ABOUT YOUR OWN RELEASE DATES OR DENIALS!



Sandra Lawrence Ruling Important Victory / Shaputis Ruling a Setback

In a 4-3 ruling, the California Supreme Court upheld a lower court decision on August 22, 2008 stating that the Governor must consider more than the crime itself when making a parole suitability decision. It was the first time in recent history that the state high court ruled in favor of a prisoner in a parole case and the ruling could impact 1,000 parole cases now on appeal. The decision upheld the release of Sandra Davis Lawrence, who spent nearly 24 years in prison. Writing for the majority, Justice Ronald George stated that there was "overwhelming" evidence of Lawrence's rehabilitation while in prison and her suitability for parole. George said state law requires the parole board and

the governor "to normally grant parole to life prisoners who have committed murder." Once a prisoner has completed his or her base sentence, Justice George wrote, the circumstances of the crime alone "rarely will provide a valid basis for denying parole when there is strong evidence of rehabilitation and no other evidence of current dangerousness." The ruling means that Sandra Lawrence, released on parole in 2005, will remain free and that hopefully many others will win their release on the basis of this precedent-setting case.

However, the California Supreme Court handed down a damaging ruling in the Shaputis case on the same day. The Supreme Court reversed the appellate court's rever-

sal of the Governor's denial of parole for Shaputis. It concluded that there was "some evidence in the record to support the Governor's conclusion that Shaputis remains a threat to public safety because he failed to take responsibility for the murder of his wife, and failed to gain insight into his previous violent behavior." Since the Shaputis ruling was made, lawyers have noticed that the BPH is more frequently using "lack of insight" as the justification for parole denials. Once a prisoner is determined to "lack insight"—an extremely vague term—it can be very difficult to dispute the label or prove that a change has occurred. Misuse of this designation will need to be challenged in the future. ■

For the compañeras inside, believing in and having their faith is the tool that maintains their mental and physical health. The compañeras stated that being spiritual for them is something they practice daily. One compañera expressed the following: “I close my eyes and tell myself I’m standing before my creator and speak my mind as if I were speaking with my best friend. I express my concerns, my happy moments and sad moments. I maintained my sanity by conversing mentally when life appears hopeless and the injustice system prevails. These conversations are my prayers and so I pray to get through the day and everyday that I’m incarcerated.” ■

Para las compañeras que estan adentro su fe es la herramienta que mantiene su salud Mental y fisica. Las compañera indicaron que creyendo y manteniendo en su fe es algo que hacen diariamente. Una compañera expreso lo siguiente que ella practica: Cierro mi ojos y me imagino que estoy aldo del Creador y me habla directamente como si estuviera conversado con mi mejor amigo. Les cuento mis preocupaciones, mis momentos felices y momentos tristes. Mantengo mi salud mental conversando con mi Creador cuando la vida parece que no hay salida y este sistema de injusticia prevalece. Estan conversaciones son mis rezos y yo rezo todos los dias que estoy encarrada. ■



The Spirituality of Transsexual Womanhood

Eva Williamsii, Corcoran Prison

Transsexual womanhood has its origins in the spirit. Womanhood takes hold in the heart and mind. What puts it there is the spirit of womanhood. The spirit is the primary ingredient, all-decisive.

For the transsexual woman, once the spirit of womanhood is imbued into her she sees with woman eyes only. She is not a male; she is a female. She is no longer a man; she is a woman. She is a woman in her heart and she loves her womanhood. She loves herself. She is a woman in her mind and thinks like a woman. She feels like a woman – feminine. She is woman only. She has the spirit of woman in her; it is her spirit. Nothing else matters; no one’s thoughts or judgments or opinion – not friends, not family, not anyone. The world will hate her: it will desert her like leaves on a tree.

There are no free rides in this. She will see who is her real friend, her real family, her real loved ones. And when they reject her for being a woman she will cry. She will cry because she thought they loved her. She will suffer, in so many ways. It is the toll she must endure in being blessed with womanhood: there must be pain in birth.

Nevertheless, the transsexual woman moves along the straight way of womanhood and does not falter regardless of what is going on around her, and that is the power of her womanhood: the world crumbles before her! It is power radiating out of her when everyone trips. It is evidence of the power of womanhood and of her individual possession of that power. It validates her womanhood.

Once she is touched or blessed with the spirit of womanhood

inside of her then it will show itself outside of her. She will not even make a conscious effort. Lining up her outside with her inside “just happens,” naturally, the result of the higher Spirit of Woman asserting itself. She opens up like a flower. The woman in her overcomes the man in her. This is the process, until the only trace is between her legs, and some do away with that to. But even with it, it takes on a female quality.

I am a transsexual lesbian, amorously and sexually oriented towards other transsexual women and towards genetic women. Transsexual lesbianism is a phenomenon within a phenomenon. Lesbianism is divine. The love of women for women takes one into the spiritual vortex of cosmic intra-polarity, and is bliss.

Excerpted from TransLesbos. ■

A lot of people have the day to day stress that comes with running a household, taking care of children, working. These stresses can cause high blood pressure, loss of sleep and appetite, low self esteem and depression. Then add a diet of fast food, fried foods, salt, white sugar and no exercise and we can see what contributes to obesity, diabetes, and heart problems.

For women, it's a double whammy. We tend to "keep on keeping on" in the face of adversity and not pay attention to the warning signs our body gives us: headaches, insomnia, backaches, nausea, over-eating and binging. Add being in prison, and you have hit an all time high of negative forces working against us. Being in prison has so many negative impacts on our health that it is hard to get a handle on it.

But there are things we can do, so let's keep it simple. We as inmates don't make the menus, but we can watch what we eat and exercise. I'm one to talk, since I am 80 lbs. overweight and have high blood pressure and chronic insomnia. I challenge you today to make some changes. Get up in the morning and do simple breathing exercises and stretching. Start your day with your higher power, whoever that is. Pray when you

take a shower. Do leg lifts while standing at the sink. Keep in mind that just walking 2 times a week for



30 minutes is a good start to exercising. While programming, keep a handle on the negativity you put out. No fried foods or foods with white refined sugar, like candy or soda. Eat fruit, like an apple, when you're hungry instead of chips and cookies. Stop eating late at night.

I am challenging myself to put what I am saying to the test since my back, hips and feet are always hurting. Let's see what yoga (breathing and stretching exercises), walking, and changing your eating and thinking can do for all of us.

A morning meditation

Stand or sit quietly, eyes closed, hands loose at your sides, your mind clear of negativity and hostility. Breathe in and out slowly, concentrating on your inner peace. These words may be helpful to you as you breathe in and out slowly:

Today is the first day of a new beginning and an awakened enlightened spirit. Take a moment to embrace the new day with determination and a desire to be better, stronger and wiser than you were yesterday. All of your yesterdays were just a prelude to the success you will achieve today. Make today's dream, tomorrow's destiny.

After we are done giving our spirits a chance to soar, let's begin our day.

Risi Bisi- A Vegetarian Dish

All of the items in this recipe can be received in a quarterly package.

Peas

Brown rice

Slivered Almonds

White Cheese

Thyme, basil, red pepper, Ms. Dash Seasoning

Barack Obama wins historic presidential election!

The election of Barack Obama, the first African-American U.S. President, is an exciting, historic event. After eight years of government horrors that included war, torture, prison expansion and global economic crisis, Obama's election was greeted all over the world

as a sign that change is possible. The energy and positive aspirations of people all over this country helped to bring about Obama's victory, and we are hopeful that this same spirit will create many significant changes in the coming period.

Defeat cradle to grave incarceration NO on propositions 6 & 9!

On Wednesday, September 24th the Eastside Arts Alliance (ESAA) in Oakland hosted a high energy townhall meeting about Propositions 6 & 9 and the need to defeat them. Over 75 youth packed the room, eager to learn how these Propositions target youth of color, immigrants and those currently incarcerated. Maisha Quint from ESAA opened the event by explaining that if passed these two propositions would greatly expand California's prioritization of prison spending over education, and stressing the importance of becoming involved in the mobilization to defeat them.

Alicia Criado from Books Not Bars and the No On 6 & 9 Coalition, focused on the terrible provisions of Prop 6. Prop 6 creates over 30 new crimes. Any youth 14 years or older charged with a "gang-related" felony must be tried as an adult. Penalties for a wide range of offenses would be increased and undocumented persons charged with a violent felony could not be released on bail. Prop 6 would cost at least \$965 million to implement in the first year alone at a time when the state budget deficit is already in the billions.

Nia Sykes and Shawna Sanchagrín from CCWP went on to explain how Prop 9 would keep people in prison once Prop 6 put them there. Prop 9 talks about protecting victims' rights, but victims already have their rights protected through the 1982 Victims Bill of Rights. Prop 9 prohibits the release of any prisoners

to relieve overcrowding. It would extend the average amount of time between parole hearings up to 15 years for prisoners with an indeterminate life sentence. Prop 9 would pour millions of more dollars into a broken prison system that is already at 150% capacity.

After the presentations, everyone broke into small groups. People talked about how the police already were all over the community, how schools were more and more like jails and how these new propositions would only make things worse. They brainstormed ideas for letting others know about how dangerous these propositions were. The event ended on a strong, positive note as everyone signed up to do phone banking, door-to-door mobilizing and an art-making day to DEFEAT PROPS 6 & 9!

Prop 6 goes down but Prop 9 wins

The overwhelming defeat of Proposition 6 (70% to 30%) sent a strong message that the public does not want to spend millions of more dollars on a failed prison system. Proposition 9 passed (53% to 47%), but only due to a well-funded media campaign filled with misleading information. Many provisions of Proposition 9 are illegal and unconstitutional. Attorneys are now getting together to figure out legal challenges to Prop 9, and grassroots organizations have begun mobilizing community responses to this outrageous proposition.



California Coalition for Women Prisoners invites and encourages all women and transgender people who have been or are on the inside to send us your writing, letters, art work, or poetry.

The next issue will be devoted to **youth**. Send us your thoughts, experiences, lessons you'd like to share.

We will **not** use your name unless you check the box below

I want my name to appear in the newsletter

Name: _____

Mail to: _____

I would like to get the next issue of *The Fire Inside*



California Coalition for Women Prisoners
A Project of Network on Women in Prison
1540 Market St., rm 490
San Francisco, CA 94102

Address Service Requested

Non profit
U.S. Postage
PAID
San Francisco, Ca.
Permit #404



Marie Africa, MOVE organizational, died in prison 1978

Come work with us!

California Coalition for Women Prisoners volunteer nights are on the 4th Wednesday of every month at 6pm
1540 Market St., rm 490, San Francisco
Write to us or call us (415) 255-7036 x314
www.womenprisoners.org
fax: (415) 552-3150, email: info@womenprisoners.org

CCWP Mission:

CCWP is a grassroots racial justice organization that challenges the institutional violence imposed on women and communities of color by prisons and the criminal justice system. We build a movement with women prisoners, family members of prisoners and the larger community through organizing, leadership development and political education.

Funded in part by Fund for Non-violence, Van Lobelsels/RembeRock, Abelard West, Omnia, The Women's Foundation, Public Welfare Foundation, Peace Development Fund, Ben & Jerry's, San Francisco Foundation, LEF Foundation, Vanguard Public Foundation, and CJI Initiative of the Funding Exchange

Yes, I want to support women prisoners!

- Please contact me to volunteer
- Enclosed is \$25 contribution to help send a newsletter subscription to a woman in prison
- Enclosed is my contribution of _____ \$

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone/email: _____

Please make checks payable to: **CCWP/LSPC** 1540 Market St., rm 490, San Francisco, CA 94102