Here we share the names of some of the many people who have resisted, survived, died, paroled, or who just keep “keeping on” through the pages of *The Fire Inside*. We honor and love them all.

Merle Africa  Janet Africa  Janine Africa  Debbie Africa  Rosie Alfaro  Yavonne “Hakim” Anderson  
Brenda Aris  Christina Avilan  Karla Baday  Romarilyn Baker  Tina Balagno  Judy Barnett  
Jeri Becker  Daisy Benson  Wanda Brown  Marilyn Buck  Marcia Bunney  LaKesha Burton  
Susan Burton  Lisa Bustamante  Pat Caetano  Christy Camp  Celeste Carrington  Anna Bell Chapa  
Sherrie Chapman  Chrystos  Pamela Coffey  Cynthia Coffman  Patty Contreras  Hamdiya Cooks  
Joy Cordes  Norma Jean Croy  Theresa Cruz  Norma Cumpian  Kerry Dalton  Terrain Dandridge  
Susan Deering  Nikki Lee Diamond  Jane Dorotik  N. Duran  Linda Evans  Cynthia Feagin  
Martha Fernandez  Linda Field  Jodie Fitzgerald  Marcie Fort  Elnora Francis  Betty Gallegos  
Delores “Dee” Garcia  Inez Garcia  Marisol Garcia  Myrtle E. Green  Sakia Gunn  Stephanie Hardie  
Shelbi Harris  Hamedah Hassan  Beverly “Chopper” Henry  Renata Hill  Debra Holmes  
Stephanie Hooks  JAB (at CCWF)  Ollie Johnson  Patreese Johnson  Patricia Johnson  Kimberly Jones  
Miriam Jones  Robin Keeble  Connie Keel  Kathy Kelly  Molly Kilgore  Gloria Killian  
Yvonne “Bunny” Knuckles  Sandra Lawrence  Terah Lawyer  Mary Ann Leigh  Chi Chi Locci  
Helen Loheac  Elizabeth Lozano  Lorrie Sue McClary  Maureen Medermott  Ivy Martin  Theresa Martinez  
Suzy Mellen  Danielle Metz  Joyce Miller  Andrea Mims  Rosario Muñoz  Leeann Nabors  Sherrie Nelson  
Sandi Nieves  Stormy Ogden  Martina Olea  Sara Olson  Jean Pacheco  Carolina Paredes  Rose Ann Parker  
Debbie Peagler  Leila Peyton  Sammy Pierce  Cynthia Purcell  Mary Ramp  Claudia Reddy  Sandra Redmond  
Judi Ricci  Ellen Richardson  Lavonne Roach  Angelina Rodriguez  Linda Rodriguez  Cynthia Russaw  
Dana Ryan  Mary Ellen Samuels  Rosie Sanchez  Tami Lee Santiago  Jamie & Gladys Scott  Mary Shields  
Charisse “Happy” Shumate  Bea Smith-Dyer  Edaleene Smith  Linda Lee Smith  Sandra Spaulding  
Carletha Stewart  Lynne Stewart  Maria Suarez  Lisa Taplett  Catherine Thompson  Dionicia Torres  
Eva Vallario  Guadalupe Valle  Suyapa Velasquez  Diann Wade  Joann Walker  Marva Wallace  
Twillah Wallace  Shirley Ward  Running Water  Vonda White  Laura Whitehorn  Rosemary Willeby  
Frankie Williams  O’cianetta Williams  Michelle Wilson  Flozelle Woodmore  Caroline Young  Debi Zuver
Entendiendo el pasado, tejiendo el futuro

The Fire Inside tuvo su chispa de vida a partir del movimiento de mujeres y gente transgénera dentro en prisión y con el apoyo que ellas mismas encendieron afuera. Se insinúa como parte de un movimiento en curso, que quema el sistema de la injusticia criminal hasta sus propias cenizas e ilumina el rumbo que nos lleva hacia un mundo mejor y más justo.

Durante los últimos 15 años, The Fire Inside ha sido una plataforma para la comunicación, para compartir ideas, escri- tos, poesía y arte, entre aquellas quienes sobreviven enjauladas y con la gente que está afuera. En cada número, la realidad de las que están entre muros toma voz. Puede ser a través de un sistema que cruel y meramente le niega a la gente su humanidad, que las destroza e intenta convencerlas de que no son nada, esta fogata las mantiene en pie. Hace que el corazón no muera de un congelamiento profundo.

Un espíritu y carácter moldeados en la resistencia a la deshumanización sistemática, que eleva las profundas expresiones de humanidad. Su decisión se adentra más allá de que las noticias de hechos particulares o eventos. The Fire Inside es un puente de ideas, de conocimiento, de fuerza, de inspiración. Este boletín informativo crea un espacio donde podemos juntar ser testigo de nuestra propia desesperación y así encontrar el coraje para seguir adelante. Sabemos que no importa lo que hallamos perdido en nuestras vidas, tenemos el propósito de unirnos, ser testigos y tomar postura, poniendo el ejemplo para otras.

Mientras tengamos una voz y podamos escuchar la voz de otras, podemos transformar nuestras condiciones. No sólo las que están adentro sufren. No sólo los que están afuera dan inspiración.

Charisse Shumate, la demandante principal en la demanda médica en grupo contra el CDCR, escribió en 1996 “No se trata de Mi, esto se trata de Nosotras…”. La experiencia de Charisse le enseñó que es actuando en solidaridad con otras prisioneras era la forma para poder lograr ella un cambio. Ya sea que esta solidaridad toma forma en una demanda a la prisión, presentando 602s en conjunto (quejas contra la conducta de los custodios) o simplemente ayudando a otras a escribir cartas a sus hogares, estas son todas manifestaciones de resistencia.

Las prisioneras, sobrevivientes de condiciones similares a las de guerra, desarrollan habilidades extraordinarias—pa-ciencia, tolerancia, resistencia, agudiza el reconocimiento de otras, intensifica la confianza en una misma, el sentido del tiempo, respeto a la verdad, lealtad, y apreciar las pequeñas cosas. Conforme más gente regresa a casa, ellas quienes están mejor calificados para crear espacios de entendimiento cultural donde una comunidad saludable puede desarrollarse. La co-municación y construcción de uniones entre todos los muros de la prisión y entre celdas, forma un tejido más resistente para el futuro. The Fire Inside es una herramienta creativa para tejer un nuevo mundo.

Los artículos de The Fire Inside no sólo son palabras y arte. Cada número es de la encarnación de la acción colectiva que desafía los esfuerzos para acallar y separar prisioneras. Ayuda a mobilizar y galvanizar gente en ambos lados de los muros de la prisión. Hacia adelante en los próximos 15 años derrum- bando muros y creando comunidades saludables y justas para todos.

“La que trata a la prisione con el corazón no muere de un congelamiento profundo.”

Desde el primer número en 1996, The Fire Inside ha mani-festado las preocupaciones de las mujeres y personas trans-géneras presas en California, tales como: cuidados de salud; la pena de muerte; espirtualidad; maternidad y cuidado de hijos; salud mental; sexualidad; y las políticas que afectan la dehumanización. The Fire Inside fue creada para tratar de humanidad, que las destroza e intenta convencerlas de que no son nada, esta fogata las mantiene en pie. Hace que el corazón no muera de un congelamiento profundo.

Un espíritu y carácter moldeados en la resistencia a la deshumanización sistemática, que eleva las profundas expresiones de humanidad. Su decisión se adentra más allá de que las noticias de hechos particulares o eventos. The Fire Inside es un puente de ideas, de conocimiento, de fuerza, de inspiración. Este boletín informativo crea un espacio donde podemos juntar ser testigo de nuestra propia desesperación y así encontrar el coraje para seguir adelante. Sabemos que no importa lo que hallamos perdido en nuestras vidas, tenemos el propósito de unirnos, ser testigos y tomar postura, poniendo el ejemplo para otras.

Mientras tengamos una voz y podamos escuchar la voz de otras, podemos transformar nuestras condiciones. No sólo las que están adentro sufren. No sólo los que están afuera dan inspiración.

Charisse Shumate, la demandante principal en la demanda médica en grupo contra el CDCR, escribió en 1996 “No se trata de Mi, esto se trata de Nosotras…”. La experiencia de Charisse le enseñó que es actuando en solidaridad con otras prisioneras era la forma para poder lograr ella un cambio. Ya sea que esta solidaridad toma forma en una demanda a la prisión, presentando 602s en conjunto (quejas contra la conducta de los custodios) o simplemente ayudando a otras a escribir cartas a sus hogares, estas son todas manifestaciones de resistencia.

Las prisioneras, sobrevivientes de condiciones similares a las de guerra, desarrollan habilidades extraordinarias—pa-ciencia, tolerancia, resistencia, agudiza el reconocimiento de otras, intensifica la confianza en una misma, el sentido del tiempo, respeto a la verdad, lealtad, y apreciar las pequeñas cosas. Conforme más gente regresa a casa, ellas quienes están mejor calificados para crear espacios de entendimiento cultural donde una comunidad saludable puede desarrollarse. La co-municación y construcción de uniones entre todos los muros de la prisión y entre celdas, forma un tejido más resistente para el futuro. The Fire Inside es una herramienta creativa para tejer un nuevo mundo.

Los artículos de The Fire Inside no sólo son palabras y arte. Cada número es de la encarnación de la acción colectiva que desafía los esfuerzos para acallar y separar prisioneras. Ayuda a mobilizar y galvanizar gente en ambos lados de los muros de la prisión. Hacia adelante en los próximos 15 años derrum- bando muros y creando comunidades saludables y justas para todos.

“La que trata a la prisione con el corazón no muere de un congelamiento profundo.”

Para los próximos 15 años, The Fire Inside ha sido un plat- form para comunicación, sharing ideas, writings, poetry and artwork among those surviving in the cages and with people on the outside. In every issue, the reality of life behind the walls is given voice. In the face of a system that cruelly and methodically denies people their humanity, that tears them down and tries to convince them they are nothing, such a fire is life-sustaining. It keeps the heart from dying in a deep freeze.

Since the first issue in 1996, The Fire Inside has ad- dressed the concerns of women and transgender prin- soners in California such as: health care; death row; spirituality; motherhood and parenting; mental health; sexuality; and policies affecting parole, immigrants and lifers. The extraordinary collaborative process of ex- change through conversations during visits, correspon- dence, and a collective editorial process creates culture across the walls. This process is part of building collec- tive resistance and transcends the false boundaries of floors, barbed wire, racism, violence and hate. We are creating a culture of care in a collective spirit.

Spirit and character shaped in resistance to systematic dehumanization give rise to profound expressions of humanity. Its lesson is deeper than the news of particu- lar issues or events. The Fire Inside is a bridge of ideas, of knowledge, of strengths, of inspiration. The news- letter creates a place where we can witness our despair together and still find the courage to go on. We know that no matter what we have lost in our lives, we have a purpose in bearing witness and taking a stand, provid- ing an example to others. As long as we have a voice and can hear the voice of another, we can transform our conditions. It is not only those on the inside who suf- fer. It is not only those on the outside who provide the inspiration.

Prisoners, as survivors of war-like conditions, develop extraordinary skills—patience, tolerance, endurance, keen awareness of others, intense self-reliance, sense of timing, respect for truth, loyalty, and gratitude for simple things. As more people come home, it is those who have been there who are best qualified to create spaces of cultural understanding where a healthy com- munity can develop. Communication and building bonds across prison walls and between cells, weaves a stronger fabric for the future. The Fire Inside is a creative tool in weaving this new world.

The articles in The Fire Inside are not just words or art. Each issue is an embodiment of collective action that deffes efforts to silence and separate prisoners. It helps to mobilize and galvanize people on both sides of the prison walls. Onwards to the next 15 years of breaking down the walls and creating healthy, just communities for all.
Charisse Shumate was a founding member of California Coalition for Women Prisoners. She was thrilled to know that there were people on the outside who wanted to work with people inside to build a strong movement in support of women in prison. She did more than anyone else in those early days to make sure that CCWP really was an organization made up of people on both sides of the walls. She recognized the importance of *The Fire Inside* as a tool to build both the organization and a movement and wrote a column for every issue. A natural organizer, Charisse gave everyone she knew a copy of the newsletter.

I first met Charisse in April 1995, as LSPC prepared to file a lawsuit stating that medical care for women prisoners in California was so bad that it amounted to cruel and unusual punishment and was, therefore, unconstitutional. As lead plaintiff, the lawsuit was named after Charisse (first called *Shumate v Wilson*, it became *Shumate v Davis*). I had heard that she was brilliant, articulate and a fine and fearless leader. The entire prison was locked down when we got there. We discussed legal strategies until suddenly Charisse materialized in the visiting room. It was magical! I had no doubt who she was, this strong woman with the most engaging smile I had ever seen.

Charisse had a clear strategic view of the lawsuit and the importance of building a movement. She understood the strengths and weaknesses of any lawsuit and was insistent that non-lawyers be involved from the very beginning. She had no doubt that the lawsuit would be victorious, but no illusions that the victory would be hollow without the political will to improve conditions of confinement. And so, CCWP was born.

Charisse was a brilliant writer. She was thrilled to have the opportunity to write for *The Fire Inside* and took her job as columnist extremely seriously. She was never late for deadline, and her columns were always relevant. When she heard there was a possibility that a second lawsuit might be filed at VSPW, she wrote a letter to the next lead plaintiff, telling her:

“Now please don’t give up. When times get rough hold your head up and know that you may be free or dead if you have acute medical needs yourself, before you see the change that we fight so hard for. But stay in peace with yourself that you are doing the right thing. It’s not a “me” thing; it’s a “we” thing...”

I had no doubt who she was, this strong woman with the most engaging smile I had ever seen.

Charisse and I met many times over the next six years. We mostly talked about our children and the deep hole that was in her heart because she had not seen her son since her arrest. With the help of the Rosenberg Fund for Children, we were able to bring Charisse’s grandchildren and daughter-in-law to visit her the year that she died. Charisse was very ill but was so excited to see the children that she stayed in the visiting room for hours, taking photos, playing games and drawing pictures. She bragged that her grandchildren were the smartest and most beautiful in the room that weekend—and she was right!

Charisse was clear-headed about her chances of getting out of prison alive. She fought for the chance to die near her family, but never really believed it was possible until she heard that the Parole Board had granted her compassionate release. By then, she was living in the skilled nursing facility in the prison. Unfortunately, Gov. Davis stalled her release and Charisse died before it was granted.

We wrote about Charisse after her death on August 4, 2001:

“Charisse had something to say to everyone. She was a tireless fighter for the human rights of women in prison. To the prison system, she was a nemesis, a constant reminder that she held them accountable for the suffering they were causing through medical neglect, callousness or outright brutality. To other prisoners, she was and continues to be an inspiration. The world is a sadder place without her, but her legacy to us is to ensure that the fire will continue in all of us for a new humanity.”

[FI #19, Fall 2001]
Racism & the prison system

The prison system gets away with exploiting prisoners while paying them slave wages because of the 13th Amendment, which reads: “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States.”

FI #8, June 1998

Gang fights happen because guards instigate Black or Mexican or white as a separate “culture.” Young women get here scared and intimidated. They are lonely, some separated from their families for the first time… The only ways they see are gang or prison “families.” So that’s what they get into. Whatever their identity was before they came to prison, the prison makes them race conscious.

FI #26, Fall 2003

Immigrant women

Exiled from the countries of their birth, railroaded into prisons and detention centers, torn from their children and denied health care because they don’t speak English—the treatment which immigrant women prisoners experience makes a cruel mockery of the promise of freedom and security which this country pretends to offer.

FI #30, Spring/Summer 2005

The new immigration laws set forth in Arizona, which rob hope and foster rejection, are preposterous. Shame on us for being proud of this wonderful country and yet we treat other human beings as if they are not human enough to live here. Officials are misusing their authority to pick and choose who they suspect to be an immigrant, which is nothing less than racial profiling.

Terah Lawyer, FlI#44, Spring 2011

Lesbianism

Some women come into prison already gay. It was their lifestyle on the streets. Others just try to try it and try it in. There are women who, out of pure loneliness, have turned to another woman and found someone to share good times and the bad ones. After a while, sex might have happened, but not always… But now you find out you have a label as a homosexual. You or your friend are moved to another woman and found someone to share good times, unit or yard.

FlI#15, August 2000

Motherhood & parenting

When you come to prison you feel just left, all alone. The separation, especially from your children, is hard. It is a punishment in itself. You try not to blame the world or your family for not doing things you would do if you could. . . . Or because you can’t call because their phone does not accept collect calls. But at the same time, it’s hard not to hear from your kids as often as you’d like.

Edaleen Smith, FlI #29, Fall/Winter 2004

Transgender experience

In June 1996, the California Coalition for Women Prisoners (CCWP) published the first issue of The Fire Inside newsletter, a collaboration between women prisoners, former prisoners and advocates on the outside. The idea was to give voice to women prisoners’ experiences, enabling them to report to the public and to each other what was really going on behind the walls.

The first issue was only four pages long, featuring articles about health care abuse written by CCWP founding members Charisse Shumate and Linda Field. Charisse wrote:

“If we were allowed to have video cameras or tape recorders, the truth could be seen or heard about the junk yard care we receive… Once again, until there is no breath in my body, I will roar the words HELP stop the killing because we are the forgotten ones. (FI #1, June 1996)

Shortly before we went to press, Dana, a former prisoner, suggested naming the newsletter ‘The Fire Inside.’ It clicked. The newsletter would reflect and nurture the fire of creativity and resistance of women and transgender prisoners in the face of the dehumanization and brutality of the prison industrial complex.

Now with 16 pages in each issue, ‘The Fire Inside’ is the only continuously published newsletter written by and for women and transgender prisoners in the United States. What started as a way to “get the word out” has grown into an important tool for communication and discussion for people inside and a way to educate and mobilize people outside. Each issue has a specific focus and regular columns, such as legal and health care updates. The focus is primarily determined by CCWP members inside. Some issues are so significant that ‘The Fire Inside’ has addressed them more than once—such as racism, parenting, life parole, and immigrants in California prisons.

In June 1996, the California Coalition for Women Prisoners (CCWP) published the first issue of the newsletter "The Fire Inside," which focuses on the experiences and activism of women and transgender prisoners in the United States. The newsletter aims to provide a platform for these voices and to challenge the dehumanization and brutality of the prison industrial complex.
The Fire Inside is inspirational. It makes me want to make things better for other women here. For example, I launched a campaign for CCWF to get a female gynecologist. It is the only women’s prison in California that doesn’t have one. The Fire Inside enables us to see other women’s issues, too, so we do not feel so alone in our fight.

LOMA UNDERWOOD

Mis felicitaciones por su gran trabajo en la presentacion del Fire Inside. Quiero darle las gracias a CCWP Compianeras por su apoyo incondicional y por siempre ayudar a las companieras inmigrantes en las prisiones. Sigana adelante con sus esfuerzos y animas que le dan Fire Inside. Y sigannos manteniendo informadas que es la unica manera que nos enteramos de lo que pasa.

DIONICIA TORRES, VSPW

sometimes The Fire Inside might be the only mail one might receive. What does this paper mean to me? A way of communication to all of us in every corner of these cement walls, CTW, CCWF, VSPW.

DAISY BENSON

Having The Fire Inside enables me to see that I’m not the only one who feels things a certain way. I’m able to keep up with the girls who have left which is especially good if I don’t know how they fared. It gives me an opportunity to share information. It helps others to have hope. I always look forward to getting The Fire Inside and it’s well worth the wait!

CYNTHIA PURCELL

The Fire Inside has helped with info concerning laws (new and old) and another thing it has helped me with is to feel other inmates’ sorrows, happiness and joy, how they are surviving in a place where it can be so dark and cold, but we keep carrying that light, of not giving up, our struggles but knowing they will soon disappear.

PAMELA BAKER

I'm a 26 year old woman at CCWP and it is heavy on my heart to express the blessing that this newsletter has been to female prisoners and our friends and family. From personal face-to-face visits, to uniting to fight for justice and against injustice—such as sentencing children to life in prison, putting battered women away for life, and the injustice of deporting immigrants who helped build America—thank you CCWF for giving us a voice and for having the courage to take a stand and fight for what’s right! Thank you for the countless battles you engage in through getting the news out and about through The Fire Inside newsletter.

CHRISTY C. PHILLIPS

As part of the California embattled Prison Nation, I send deep appreciation and gratitude to all of you who participate in CCWP’s The Fire Inside. The life-lines of generosity, compassion, practical assistance and love that you have gifted so many of us with is an extended definition of the “extended family”...the invitations to participate in the “publishing of our individual voices” in The Fire Inside is the therapeutic milieu so needed by prisoners. Feelings of voicelessness is the fire inside of me that needed an emotional outlet and an opportunity for ventilations.... [The Fire Inside] continues to allow HOPE to sprout in our hearts and make viable options to self-empowerment possible.

KHADIJA GHAFUR

I've been incarcerated for the last fifteen and a half years. Through The Fire Inside I was able to communicate some of the process that I went through while incarcerated.

GUADALUPE VALLE
The Fire Inside helps a lot of people to stay in touch with what's going on, especially inside the prison. Those of us in specialized housing don't get informed about things happening even within the prison we are in. It also takes up issues that are important to us: children, medical, general health like arsenic in our water, changes in the law that might affect us, etc.

A WOMAN IN SPECIALIZED HOUSING, CCWF

To the women at VSPW and all who are fighting for their freedom: never give up, never quit. God will see you through. I know you are tired, but you must fight. Thank you ladies for the love and support I felt there. You all helped carry me through in so many ways. We got to be strong and care for one another this is the only way. I love you all with peace and with respect.

CYNTHIA FEAGEN

I remember when I came up here to CCWF after spending 13 years at CIW. I was totally devastated. I had gotten a copy of The Fire Inside. I was inspired by the issues they were pledging to fight for such as lifer parole, battered women, medical, legal issues and living conditions inside prison. But most important, it kept me informed on what the women in CIW and VSPW were doing and dealing with and fighting for. I felt this was a way to stay connected with all the women and to help spread the word of our battles and achievements.

JOY CORDES, CCWF

What The Fire Inside Means to Me: Writings From Inside

I love reading your articles because it is knowledge that we prisoners can use to fight back against injustice. The incarcerated community has a voice and fares much better because of you. Even the self knowledge is helpful and I admire the time, energy, effort and dedication all of you put into making this possible for everyone to see.

YOLANDA FOSTER

Quiero darles un cordial saludo y felicidades por siempre mantenernos informadas de todo lo que pasa en las prisiones. Cada vez que leo el Fire Inside yo lo regalo a otras compañeras que no lo reciben. También quiero agradecer a CCWP compañeras por siempre apoyar a todas las compañeras inmigrantes.

KARLA BADAY, VSPW

I really look forward to receiving The Fire Inside. It means a lot to me that you all care about us and are working hard on our behalf. Here's a short poem to say thank you, thank you, thank you!

Behind bars all alone
Broken families with nowhere to turn
When society neglects its prisoners, then we are the forgotten ones.
But thanks to you and your advocacy team
We are able to communicate
Our families are able to strive for change
We are not forgotten.

VERNA CARDINAL

A tribute to The Fire Inside

as I take a stroll down memory lane, it gives me such a pleasure to explain, how a group of women on a mission, changed my life and encouraged my decisions. I remember many years ago, arguing, fighting, and being involved in all kinds of trouble. But, to my surprise, I was introduced to the fire inside, who suddenly opened my eyes, to a better life, and the will to survive...

I feel privileged to say, how they helped me along the way, and today, I would like to take this time to express my appreciation, and become a part of your 15th anniversary celebration. congratulations.

thank you fire inside, as we encourage you to keep hope alive...

DONNA ANDERSON
A Life Sentence
Is Not A Death Sentence

DEIRDRE WILSON

The 44 preceding issues of The Fire Inside trace a path back to a period of extraordinary unity, determination and resistance to oppression in California women’s prisons. This article takes a look at first steps on that path through the eyes of some who were there and have since won their freedom.

In the early 1990s, a core group of women collectively realized that acting as ‘we’ rather than ‘me’ was a matter of life and death. They made noise, organized on the inside, got support from the outside, claimed their human dignity and saved lives. I am grateful for the insights provided by Sandra Redmond, Connie Keel, Lakeisha Burton, Marcia Bunney, Mary Shields, Beverly Henry, Romarilin Baker, Linda Field, Ollie Johnson, and Beatrice Smith-Dyer.

Central California Women’s Facility (CCWF) was opened in Chowchilla in 1990. Five years later, Valley State Prison for Women (VSPW) was opened across the street. Outside lawyers and advocates, such as Catherine Campbell, Ellen Barry, Karen Shain, Judy Greenspan, Diana Block, Urszula Frydman, Olivia Wang, and Cindy Chandler went into the prison to learn about the lives of women and trans prisoners. HIV/AIDS was spreading and abysmal medical care contributed to a murderously high death rate. According to Mary Shields, “People were dropping like flies.” She and Marcia Bunney painfully recalled losing 22 sisters in one four month period!

The atmosphere was ripe for challenge. These activists realized that they had two common enemies: intransigent, incompetent callousness on the part of most medical staff and correctional officers (COs); and judgments and discrimination among the prisoners themselves. Marcia Bunney noted, “People resented prisoners with HIV/AIDS had any ‘privileges’ or ‘special treatment’ and were not compassionate.”

As Beverly “Chopper” Henry describes, “People were real funny-acting about illnesses and the AIDS thing. I tested positive in 1994. From living in the AIDS unit, I became well aware of being caught up in discrimination about being positive and having a girlfriend.” Beverly describes a heartbreaking experience when she was the first person to be disciplined for ‘sexual activity’ while HIV-positive (even though no physical contact was witnessed and she and her partner were fully clothed). She was taken away, wearing a face-mask and plastic hand-cuffs, and put in Administrative Segregation. ostracized and demeaned by guards and prisoners alike, her voice still cries with the pain that this caused her as a young woman who had just been diagnosed with a life-threatening disease.

Beatrice Smith-Dyer worked as a peer counselor and was in the Skilled Nursing Facility (SNF) at least once a day for four to five years in the early 90s. “It was horrible on the yard for people who were really sick,” she explained. “What happened in the SNF was even worse. A woman in her mid-twenties came from CIW [California Institution for Women] with colon cancer; we thought it was the asbestos,” Bea remembers. She underwent three chemo treatments but her condition deteriorated. “She didn’t want to leave the housing unit. She thought if she went to the SNF she would die.” Eventually she had to go to the SNF. Bea recalls, “They just put her in a cold room and left her alone. One of the peer counselor staff said to us one day, ‘Can you please go see her because I know she’s dying.’ I went in the room and there was throw-up everywhere—on the walls, floor, and the bed. When I came in, she took her nightgown off and threw it over to the side so it wouldn’t smell as much. I just cried. Why should anyone have to die like that!?” The lady who asked her to check on her went to see her after I left and reported the CO and the nurses.”

Beverly remembers Charisse “Happy” Shumate saying that she had to “bang on the window” as she went past the room where Joanne Stovel was lying weak with AIDS, to make the Medical Staff person remove the pillow he was holding over her face! Joanne, who wrote for The Fire Inside, was also an HIV Peer Counselor. Beverly told us, “She walked the yard all day talking with people before they finally gave her a proper office. They wanted to silence Joanne for being part of so many [outside] organizations.”

Although many people challenged the mistreatment and abuse, there was one person according to all the women, who stood out as extraordinary—Happy. When Mary told Happy she’d been diagnosed with Stage 3 uterine cancer, even though Happy had just returned from the hospital for treatment for her sickle cell disease she told Mary, “Shut up! We’ll fight it together!”

Mary goes on, “One night Happy got the idea that people outside needed to know what was going on and that things needed to be put down in writing. She stayed up writing all night. ‘We’ve got to get this message out,’ Happy said. She wrote out a plan and worked on it with Karen Shain.”

As the movement was built, there was a shift in the way those doing life sentences perceived themselves and one another. Marcia describes, “It was a broad based movement, primarily of lifers and lifers on the installment plan, who felt pain about those dying of HIV, cancer, etc.” A spark of hope lifted the community in 1995 with the release of Betty Gallegos (who passed away in July 2011). “Betty was the first female lifer to be released in a long time. She had been very active with Happy in Women’s Advisory Council. It rocked the prison” says Marcia. Mary goes on, “It was a spark of fire and gave us a reason to keep fighting.”

It is timely to memorialize a period of great inspiration in response to great desperation created by women and trans prisoners acting together. The historic hunger strike initiated at Pelican Bay State Prison, on July 1, 2011 is also such a moment. Let us bring all the courage and hope that has kept The Fire Inside burning for 15 years to move the struggle forward for imprisoned people everywhere!
Pelican Bay Hunger Strike

Driven by years of indefinite security Housing Unit (SHU) sentences, prisoners at Pelican Bay State Prison (PBSP) initiated a peaceful hunger strike on July 1, 2011. One of the prisoners called their situation “an extra-legal death sentence,” because the prison’s policy is that they either snitch on others or die in the SHU. The isolation forced on them is internationally recognized as torture. Their designation as gang members is not based on a conviction for a gang-related crime, but on the word of a guard or “a confidential source”. Their 6-year review of active/inactive gang status is not based on evidence, only a guard’s word. They are, in effect, sentenced to death without due process. After protesting their situation for years, they went on hunger strike as a last recourse.

Underlying all their demands is “a plea that our humanity and dignity be respected.” The 5 core demands are: (1) End group punishment (2) Abolish the debriefing policy, which forces prisoners to snitch (3) End long-term solitary confinement (4) Provide adequate and nutritious food (5) Provide programming opportunities. “We are not asking for anything special in our treatment, only the due process of law that has already been enshrined in the U.S. Constitution,” said one prisoner.

One success of the strike is that it united prisoners in the SHU across racial lines. Black, Latino and white prisoners are all participating, and insisting that each group be included in their selected representatives who met with California Department of Corrections & Rehabilitation (CDCR) officials. The strike drew widespread support across PBSP and spread to other California prisons, including women at CCWF, VSPW and CIW. CDCR admitted that 6,600 prisoners participated the strike at one point.

On August 23, 2011, hundreds of people converged on Sacramento to attend a Public Safety Committee hearing called by Assemblyman Tom Ammiano. Former prisoners, dozens of family members, advocates and experts all gave eloquent testimony describing torture in the SHU. CDCR’s Scott Kernan attempted to defend these policies, but the Assembly members in attendance challenged his justifications. The family members who testified exposed the many lies in the report.

CDCR has a history of ignoring or changing their own promises to change their torturous policies. In 2001 over 1,000 prisoners took part in a hunger strike at PBSP and one other prison, suspended after State Sen. Richard Polanco (D-Los Angeles) vowed to help broker a resolution. CDCR did not make any changes. In 2008 CDCR’s own study found that their long-term isolation policies are ineffective, yet they buried the report.

On August 23, 2011, hundreds of people converged on Sacramento to attend a Public Safety Committee hearing called by Assemblyman Tom Ammiano. Former prisoners, dozens of family members, advocates and experts all gave eloquent testimony describing torture in the SHU. CDCR’s Scott Kernan attempted to defend these policies, but the Assembly members in attendance challenged his justifications. The family members who testified exposed the many lies in his statements.

For more up-to-date information, visit: http://prisonerdirestrucksolidarity.wordpress.com.

STOP THE TORTURE!

“’For 21 1/2 years we have been quietly held in Pelican Bay State Prison solitary confinement under some of the most horrible conditions known to man. So we continue to struggle to be treated like decent human beings. The system cannot play us because we are going to make peaceful demonstrations in order to resist this torture.”

Matope Doguma (in James Crossman), August 2011

Supreme Court Rules to Reduce Prison Population

In a landmark decision on May 23, 2011, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that overcrowding in California’s prisons has resulted in cruel and unusual punishment in violation of the Eighth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. The Court’s ruling means the state must reduce its prison population by approximately 32,000 prisoners within the next two years. The Court ruled in a 5-4 decision with the majority saying that the reduction was needed in order to correct long-standing abuses of prisoners’ rights. Four justices dissented from the ruling, stating that it would result in the release of tens of thousands of dangerous felons.

The Court ruling was the result of more than a decade of litigation by prisoners’ advocates regarding the serious inadequacies in mental and physical health services in the California prison system. In 2009, there was nearly one death each week that might have been prevented or delayed with better medical care. In January 2010, three federal judges ordered California officials to reduce the state’s severe prison overcrowding as the only way to insure adequate health care. The state’s 33 adult prisons were designed to hold 80,000 prisoners but currently hold more than 142,000.

In a follow-up to the Supreme Court ruling, on July 1st the three-judge panel set strict deadlines for compliance. By December 27, 2011 the number of prisoners must be at or below 133,600. Further cuts need to happen subsequently in order to bring the population down to 111,000 by June 27, 2013.

Governor Brown’s realignment strategy is the main method being proposed by the state to accomplish this reduction. Under realignment, thousands of state prisoners will be transferred to county jails. However, it is unclear where the money will come from to support the additional prisoners in county facilities. Californians United for a Responsible Budget, a statewide coalition which includes CCWF, argues that jail expansion does not solve the problem with California’s prisons.

The Supreme Court decision is an opportunity for California to shrink both its prisons and jails through parole and sentencing reforms such as: the repeal of three strikes; reform of drug laws; release of terminally ill and medically incapacitated prisoners; and the elimination of return to custody as a sanction for administrative and technical parole violations. With a true reduction in prison population, California’s budget priorities can then be shifted towards social investment in such critical areas as education, healthcare and housing in communities of color and poor communities.

Corrections

The Editorial in the Spring 2011 issue (FI#44) incorrectly stated that “in January 2011, the Supreme Court issued a very daunting decision that said prisoners have no constitutional right to parole.”

This statement was incorrect. Maria Gonzalez, staff attorney for Legal Services for Prisoners with Children, explains that the Court actually said that California life-term prisoners do not have a basis for a claim in the Federal Courts as long as they get a parole hearing and a written reason for the denial from the Board of Parole Hearings. This means that felons will not be able to file writs challenging parole decisions in the Federal Courts, but it doesn’t impact the write in the news article. The new law could also jeopardize the freedom of felons who won their release through a federal court writ if the state is currently appealing their release.

We apologize for any confusion our mistake might have caused. We will be writing more about the impact of this ruling in a future issue.

An article in Spring 2011 (FI#44) incorrectly reported one recipient, Zury Mellin (VSPW), of the Southern California Mediation Association’s Peacemaker Award during VSPW’s October 2, 2010 Peace Day. We quickly heard from Zury and from Laurel Kaufner and Doug Neil, who moderated the mediation training, that she was only one of 15 women at VSPW to participate in the training and receive this prestigious award.

The full list of 15 Peacemaker Award winners is: Barbara Chavez, Breanne Eldridge, Penny Geez, Shelli Harris, Anna Hummonston, Sara Jackson-Reynolds, Christine Lloyd, Candace MacDonald, Miantsa McKnight, Sury Mellin, Betty Mills, Jan Rusche, Susan Russo, Robyn Sotelo, and Marta Ulen.

We apologize for not listing all of those honored in our original article. For more information on this important program: http://www.womenprisoners.org/fi/0009962.html

Parole Beat

The gates are opening! Since Governor Brown took office, people who have been denied for years are finally getting out of prison. CCWP/FBW have been working with many of the women below, some for as long as 15 years. Thank you to all who wrote letters and signed petitions.

Marisol Garcia, going home to Mexico and her children! Tammy Sue Walters, now 36 years old, after 22 years inside. Romaryl Baker Karen Narita

Cynthia Feagin Darlene Brazil

Marcia Bunney Joyce Pettis

Found suitable, waiting for Gov. Brown’s decision: Jasmine Brandl Tania Vargas

Joanne Marchetti Erika Schomberg

Elizabeth Dial Marjorie Duncan

California Coalition for Women Prisoners
The Fire Inside
Project of the Network for Women in Prison and California Coalition for Women Prisoners
1540 Market Street, Suite 490
San Francisco, CA 94102

(415) 255-7036 x4
(415) 552-3150 fax
info@womenprisoners.org
www.womenprisoners.org

Our Mission
CCWP is a grassroots social justice organization, with members inside and outside prison, that challenges the institutional violence imposed on women, transgender people, and communities of color by the prison industrial complex. We see the struggle for racial and gender justice as central to dismantling the PIC and we prioritize the leadership of the people, families, and communities most impacted in building this movement.

Join us!
Meetings on the first Wednesday and third Saturday of every month

Founders
Ben & Jerry's Foundation
Folsom Street Events
Funding Exchange
Victor and Lorraine Honig Fund
Kazan, et al
LEF
People's Life Fund
Rainbow Grocery Cooperative
Redistribution Fund
Solidago Foundation
Van Loben Sels/RembeRock
The Women's Foundation