

**Middle Street Publishing:
Using Technology to Advocate
from Inside a Federal Prison**
Christopher Zoukis

A HISTORY BORN IN STRUGGLE

Middle Street Publishing (MSP) is a South Carolina not-for-profit, public benefit corporation that is dedicated to social justice. We are a prison education and prison reform advocacy organization that employs technology to advocate more effectively and visibly than we could on our own in the more traditional publishing and activism spheres.

Like many other prison reform groups, MSP has its roots in the prison itself. I have been writing for some time from the federal prison where I am incarcerated and I had the rather common experience of being retaliated against for my efforts. This was the initial spark that ultimately led to the start of MSP.

In 2012, after publishing my first book, *Education Behind Bars: A Win-Win Strategy for Maximum Security* (Sunbury Press, 2012), my prison's administration threw me in the Special Housing Unit for allegedly conducting a business without staff authorization. In the end, I was issued three incident reports, spent five months in the hole, and lost phone and email access for several years. Luckily, I was blessed by a supportive family, who retained the Law Offices of Alan Ellis to defend me. After a few more months of legal maneuvering, all of the incident reports lodged against me were expunged from my record. I was cleared of all wrongdoing. Sadly, the trouble was not yet over.

Come 2014, when my second book was published, *College for Convicts: The Case for Higher Education in American Prisons* (McFarland & Company, 2014), the prison again went after me for allegedly conducting a business. This time they issued four incident reports, which again resulted in my loss of communications for years. Attorneys Alan Ellis and Todd Bussert came on and successfully defended me, again seeing all of the incident reports expunged from my record.

It was in the aftermath of this 2014 series of retaliatory incident reports that MSP was born. The formal organization was created in an effort to distance me from the actual operations, while still allowing me to write. Since its inception, MSP has served this purpose well.

THE LAST FOUR YEARS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE ADVOCACY

Since its founding, MSP has been on the cutting edge of prison reform reporting. While some organizations base their efforts on a team of dedicated volunteers, MSP is different. It is staffed by professional managers and contract experts. The objective here was to gain a sense of accountability, as well as the ability to aggressively pursue social advocacy objectives as they arise. In the last several years, MSP has launched websites, books, a Corrlinks.com news service for federal prisoners, and media campaigns on a number of related topics. In 2016, the American Bar Association named MSP's *Prison Law Blog* a Top 100 Law Blawg for attorneys.

MSP continues to grow, operating three primary websites: PrisonerResource.com, a website which explains the Federal Bureau of Prisons to soon-to-be federal prisoners, their families and their attorneys; PrisonEducation.com, a website which promotes prison education and provides resources and information relating to correspondence and in-prison educational programs; and ChristopherZoukis.com, a website which profiles the advocacy work that I personally engage in.

In addition to these websites, the dedicated team at MSP assist with the submission of articles to a number of leading outlets. These include *The Huffington Post*, *New York Daily News*, *Prison Legal News* and *NewsMAX*. When engaging in this sort of outreach, the team monitors breaking stories, sends research to our incarcerated writers to use in drafting articles, and then handles publication of the articles. They also utilize Twitter, Facebook, Google+, LinkedIn, GoodReads, and LibraryThing to promote such articles online and to connect with free world readers.

MSP also connects with in-prison readers through Corrlinks.com, a website that federal prisoners can use for email. Three times a week, the team distributes articles of interest to federal prisoners for free. Federal prisoners can sign up for this free service by adding the following contact information to their TRULINCS contact list:

Prison News Service
news@prisonlawblog.com

The Corrlinks.com news service encompasses yet another example of MSP's success in spite of strife and oppression. On 31 March 2017, the Federal Bureau of Prisons issued a national ban of the service. This resulted in all incarcerated subscribers being blocked from receiving the news updates. MSP retained the services of attorney Brandon Sample, who appealed the ban. On 14 April 2017, the Bureau rescinded the ban, but elected to delete all of the subscribers. While access has been turned back on at the national level, we continue to have to fight against local bans implemented at specific institutions. As with every detail of prison publishing, there is a struggle, but we must persevere.

MSP also reaches out on important issues via books. To date, MSP has promoted all three of my books and even published the final one: *Federal Prison Handbook: The Definitive Guide to Surviving the Federal Bureau of Prisons* (Middle Street Publishing, 2017). In promoting this book, along with the *Prison Education Guide* (Prison Legal News Publishing, 2016) and *College for Convicts* (McFarland & Co., 2014), MSP has aggressively pursued book reviews, article placements and distribution partnerships. To date, all three of the books have been commercially and critically successful. In June 2017, the *Federal Prison Handbook* even went so far as to place third in the Indie Reader Discover Awards for nonfiction books.

THE POLITICS OF MIDDLE STREET PUBLISHING

MSP started as the voice of one prisoner, but grew to encompass the voices of many. While still a small team, MSP publishes and promotes the written works of many prison writers. In the future, MSP hopes to publish additional criminal justice books that will help those in need understand their rights and how to assert them. One such book in development is an analysis of federal supervised release. The MSP team is currently in the process of procuring research into this very hidden area, which even the Freedom of Information Act cannot penetrate.

As our team looks to the future, we hope to continue the same types of work that we have engaged in over the past few years. We also remain unapologetically supportive of all prisoners, wherever they might be and regardless of their crimes. In the current political and social climate, it has become popular to throw some classes of prisoners to the wolves, while squabbling over small improvements for other classes of prisoners. We

at MSP view such rhetoric as a fundamental violation of principle and encourage other groups to take the same stance. As we would not restrict our coverage to only prisoners of a certain race, gender or religion, we also would not restrict our coverage or support to only prisoners convicted of a certain type of crime.

THE FUTURE OF STRUGGLE

The advent of the internet has resulted in a seismic shift in what is possible in the world of prison publishing and advocacy. Staff reporters and governments no longer decide what is on the agenda. We the people do. We encourage others to follow our lead in the intelligent use of management and technology to make your voices heard above. At MSP, we extend an invitation to other like-minded groups – connect with us so that we can show you how we do what we do. MSP may only be one voice, but in cooperation with other advocates utilizing our methods, we could cause a tidal wave of coverage that could not be silenced and would demand change.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christopher Zoukis, a PEN American Center award winning incarcerated writer, is the author of *Federal Prison Handbook* (Middle Street Publishing, 2017), *Prison Education Guide* (Prison Legal News Publishing, 2016), and *College for Convicts* (McFarland & Co., 2014). He is also a contributing writer to *The Huffington Post*, *New York Daily News*, *Prison Legal News* and *NewsMAX*. In January 2017, he earned his bachelor's degree from Adams State University. He is currently pursuing his MBA. Upon his 2018 release, he hopes to attend law school to become a federal criminal defense attorney. He can be found online at PrisonerResource.com or contacted at the address below.

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