

## **InterNational Prisoner's Family Conference** *Carolyn Esparza*

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In 2009 a small and virtually unknown grassroots organization took a bold leap of faith having no idea where it would lead and absolutely no funds for the undertaking. The agency director sent out a few e-mails announcing it would be hosting a “national conference devoted to strengthening the prison family”.

After over thirty years serving prisoners and their families, the director became fully exasperated at seeing families with incarcerated loved ones shunned by society with almost the same disdain as prisoners, left to face their pain and humiliation, alone. The tipping point leading to the concept of a conference came upon hearing the third superintendent of school counselors in a row, in the community where the organization was attempting to establish a mentoring program for children with incarcerated parents, repeat an all too familiar phrase that seethed with disdain, “We do not have children of prisoners in our schools!”

Knowing at least one in every seven students in our nation's schools is affected by the incarceration of a loved one, it suddenly became mandatory to the agency's director that the public be made aware of the devastation mass incarceration causes families and communities. While it was likely few prison family members would be able to attend, it was possible curious community members and criminal justice officials might come and the conference might heighten awareness and ultimately elicit support for the entire prison family.

With that, the agency director began an e-mail campaign announcing the conference would be held in February of 2009 in El Paso, Texas. Although El Paso was no longer the tourist attraction it once had been and air travel always requires plane transfers to reach the remote desert location, as home to the small agency, financially it was the only option to keep conference costs manageable.

Eliciting the full support of the agency's small staff and a few volunteers, the group set out to produce the best conference possible. The response was overwhelming! With nothing more than e-mail announcements, word spread. The conference featured speakers representing secular and faith-based organizations, along with criminal justice and even prison family members themselves. Registration grew to almost 200 attendees from across the country as clear indication of the critical need to provide support for families affected by the incarceration of a loved one. The conference

was powerful and went off without a glitch. Amidst parting tears and hugs, many attendees indicated the desperate need to continue the conference as an annual event and urged that it be expanded from two days to three.

Unaware of what lay ahead, it was decided to take the conference on the road to reach more people. The team pushed full steam ahead and located a venue in Orlando, Florida. As indication of the group's desire to work cooperatively with the criminal justice system, the next order of business was to invite the director of Florida prisons to be the opening keynote. Nine full months before the conference, the prison director accepted the invitation, followed by months of correspondence clarifying the logistics of his presentation.

In 2010, the United States was barely recovering from the financial crisis, when accounts of banks and huge corporations teetering on collapse filled media headlines. Political unrest grew over the means to financially save them from going under. These large corporations and even the U.S. government were publicly scandalized for engaging in frivolous and outrageously expensive conferences and in the midst of it all we learned of the horrid Madoff ponzi scheme that was the ruin of many investing families who lost their entire life savings.

The country's downward economic spiral and outrage at wasteful conferences directly impacted our conference attendance. When inquiring why virtually no one from Florida had registered for the conference, the response was stunning. Many Florida nonprofit organizations had invested heavily with Madoff as a fundraising plan and most had been forced to close their doors. Regardless, plans for the conference forged ahead in many ways bolstered by one phone call from Dan, a resident of Orlando who had learned about the conference from his mother – in New York! Dan had been released from prison only six months before and was residing in an Orlando halfway house. During the hour-long phone call he strongly urged the need for the conference and expressed he would make the arrangements to gain permission to attend.

Two weeks before the conference with no explanation and despite nine months of planning, the director of Florida prisons summarily cancelled his opening keynote address. Shocked, but still believing someone should represent the criminal justice system, with no other known prospects thoughts immediately turned to Dan.

A quick phone call was made inviting Dan to literally fill in for director of Florida prisons! After a few laughs, he graciously accepted and plans were

back on track. Despite a lower attendance than year one, the conference again had a powerful impact on attendees, and Dan's exceptional keynote address became the highlight of the conference.

When registration for the third conference to be held in Portland, Oregon was again slow, one supporter asked, "What will be the breaking point?" The organization's director and now chair of what was hoped to become an annual conference inquired, "What do you mean, 'breaking point'?" The supporter responded, "How many will need to register before you have to call off the conference?" Stunned, the director replied, "There will be a conference."

The Oregon conference was followed by a New Mexico conference and for the first time advocacy on behalf of the prison family was introduced. Attendees met both evenings of the conference and drafted the first-ever Prison Family Bill of Rights to serve as talking points when advocating with legislators and criminal justice officials on behalf of prisoners and their loved ones. Although attendance remained down from the first year, the conferences were successful with more prison family members attending each year and somehow each year registration fees covered the cost of producing the conference. However, in an effort to remain financially solvent, while increasing attendance by keeping registration fees as low as possible, the conference moved back to Texas where the organization's nonprofit status would save well over one thousand dollars in sales taxes.

The 2013 conference was held in Houston where the first international attendees were welcomed and attendance improved. Advocacy was taken to a much higher level with well-respected criminal justice reform activist Ray Hill leading conference attendees in initiating the national END MASS Incarceration movement. From that point forward, the conference assumed a major role in criminal justice reform.

In 2014 the conference found a more permanent home in Dallas. As a major air hub Dallas keeps travel costs down for attendees, and the Wyndham Hotel's generosity has helped keep registration fees low which has enabled the conference to grow to over 200 attendees. Not only is the hotel a lovely and welcoming setting, but over the years it was learned that many staff (who have now become like family) have been touched by incarceration – some have been incarcerated themselves. The word "conference" does not accurately describe the event. Several years ago, one conference attendee announced, "This is not a conference at all. This is a community!" And, indeed it is!

The conference has truly become a warm embracing community and action-oriented body striving to improve the quality of life for all who have been affected by mass incarceration. Increasingly more prison families are attending, noting the conference to be a life-changing experience. Many comment that the conference experience is the first time they have been able to fully relax and just be themselves. One attendee whose son had been incarcerated for over seven years announced, "This is the first time I've ever told anyone he is in prison, even his younger brother and sister still don't know."

The event has also matured from a solely information sharing venue to undertaking meaningful active advocacy on behalf of the entire prison family. Francis Ssuubi from Uganda, among the conference's first international attendees, left the Houston conference with a vision that he put into action, leading to the launching of the InterNational Coalition for Children with Incarcerated Parents at the 2015 conference. Representatives from ten different countries on three different continents affirmed their commitment to improving the quality of life for all children affected by parental incarceration. They have become a working body and are currently planning a Children with Incarcerated Parents Conference in New Zealand.

Also, in 2015 the conference Advocacy in Action Coalition was formally launched and began taking meaningful steps toward ending mass incarceration in this country. Headed by Dr. Avon Hart Johnson, the Advocacy in Action Coalition Task Force drafted a White Paper validating the critical need for independent oversight of the entire criminal justice system and affirming the "mass incarceration continuum as a human rights issue".

The coalition task force, consisting of members from across the country and abroad, meets monthly by teleconference and is devoted to amplifying the voice of the prison family. The task force has developed powerful advocacy resources and strategizes the most effective means to use those resources to achieve true criminal justice reform. In addition to the coalition, White Paper validating the need for criminal justice reform, the group has produced a slide show visually identifying the devastating consequences of mass incarceration to be used at community presentations, as well as college and university classrooms.

The coalition has also initiated production of a powerful documentary to humanize the entire prison family. Conference Chair, Carolyn Esparza states, "In many ways this documentary should have been the first step in any advocacy on behalf of the prison family. If we want change, we must

first eliminate society's stereotypes of the prison family and literally prove we are worthy of the changes we seek. The documentary puts a face on those most directly impacted by the mass incarceration continuum and will eliminate frightening myths to increase community understanding and support". The group is currently raising funds to complete production of the documentary featuring former prisoners and family members and friends, all leading positive and productive lives, despite facing demeaning stereotypes to overcome numerous roadblocks to their success.

The ninth annual InterNational Prisoner's Family Conference was held 3-5 May 2017 in Dallas, Texas. The conference featured keynote presentations and workshops all relevant to prison family members; a student social justice forum; evening advocacy sessions; a prisoners' arts and crafts display; and an exhibit area with resources for improving the quality of life for all who are affected by incarceration personally and professionally. The tenth annual InterNational Prisoner's Family Conference will be held 10-12 October 2018 in Dallas, Texas.

Prisoners are encouraged to submit creative writings (fiction; memoir and poetry), small fine art pieces and crafts of leatherwork, woodwork and jewelry for display and silent auction at the conference. Cash prizes are awarded to the top three winners in each category. To receive competition guidelines and/or to correspond with the conference chair, send a self-addressed stamped envelope to:

Prisoner's Family Conference  
2200 N. Yarbrough, B-245  
El Paso, Texas 79925  
U.S.A.

Prisoners are also encouraged to let their family members and friends know about the conference. Community members can visit the conference website at [www.prisonersfamilyconference.org](http://www.prisonersfamilyconference.org). The organization can also be contacted by e-mail at [info@prisonersfamilyconference.org](mailto:info@prisonersfamilyconference.org) or phone at 915-861-7733.