

PRISONERS' STRUGGLES

Fighting Prison Censorship: An Interview with Paul Wright

Seth Ferranti

P*rison Legal News* is a 48-page monthly with a circulation of nearly 6000 that has published more than 200 issues since its inception in May 1990. This makes *Prison Legal News* the longest running prison publication in US history. The publication can be found in prisons across the nation, as well as in public libraries, Ivy League law schools, judges' chambers, and even in the offices of prison wardens and correctional officials. *Prison Legal News* has broken dozens of stories whose legal and political reverberations have been felt on both sides of the razor wire. For prison issues and news from the inside, the publication is cutting edge. It stays on top of legal decisions that affect prisoners and their cases, prisoner's rights and censorship issues. It reports on cases, educates prisoners about their rights, and at the same time is also an example of prisoner's rights to information and the press.

The newsletter was started from inside by convicted murderer turned jailhouse lawyer turned prisoner rights advocate, Paul Wright. Wright, who did 16 years in the Washington State system after a botched robbery of a cocaine dealer which left the dealer dead, started writing the newsletter from inside after being subjected to the alienating, arbitrary, brutal and dehumanizing environment of prison. He felt the need for circulation of information about what was happening in different prisons amongst prisoners. *Prison Legal News* provided this information. It has been a constant battle for Paul. He has fought prison censorship since the jump, filing over 20 lawsuits in an effort to curtail prison officials from banning the publication in American prisons. He has done some very important First Amendment lawsuits around the country that have exposed the fears prison administrators have about prisoners having and sharing information about their cases and the conditions they are subjected to.

Since his release in 2003, Paul has continued to publish *Prison Legal News*. He has expanded it in fact, setting up a website with an extensive legal archive on prison related issues. He has also been speaking at conferences and seminars on the state of American prisons. The hard hitting content of his publication has caused tons of controversy amongst prison authorities. Paul paid the price for publishing the newsletter during his incarceration, as prison officials retaliated against him and tried to intimidate him into not writing for or producing the publication. He was

never told he could not write, but he was subjected to all types of arbitrary and discretionary decisions that affected his routine and status in prison, including having his material confiscated, being transferred, thrown in the hole, and facing disciplinary sanctions for bogus incident reports – all this because of his writing! Paul persevered and lived through the unrelenting pressure the prison officials put on him. Now he is out, still fighting the system and still fighting prison censorship. I sat down with Paul and here is what he had to say:

Seth Ferranti: What is Prison Legal News about?

Paul Wright: We're a small publication, but we've always had an influence that is pretty far out of proportion to our readership. We're targeting people who are doing something behind bars and policy makers as well as opinion makers on the outside. There are 2.3 million people locked up in America. We're the only publication that covers detention facilities. That is a crying shame.

Seth: Why have you taken it upon yourself to challenge prison censorship?

Paul: No one else will! Or else people do, but it makes little sense to publish a magazine if your target audience cannot read it. The reason we are censored is because it is the information prisoners need to have the most. The sad thing is that few, if any other publishers who pay lip service to the notion of free speech, actually care enough about their First Amendment rights or those of their readers to do anything when their rights are violated.

Seth: Describe the prison administration mentality for violating prisoners' First Amendment rights.

Paul: They act with total impunity and are pretty much not accountable to anyone, so they are free to violate the First Amendment rights of prisoners and publishers alike. There is no downside to doing it for them. They usually get away with it and occasionally when they do not they are just back to square one. At worst, the tax payers are out some money for the damages and attorney fees.

Seth: In prison culture today, it seems like prisoners are less willing to fight for their rights. Why do you think this is?

Paul: Because it mirrors non-prisoners as well, where everyone is demoralized, beat down and defeated. They do not think they can fight for their rights and win. It has to do with American culture where people have no concept of loyalty to anyone or anything beyond themselves. Part of it is that the government is fairly powerful and ruthless in crushing any opposition. Prisoners tend to know this firsthand.

Seth: What are prison administrators so scared of?

Paul: An ignorant and uneducated class of prisoners is a lot easier to manage and manipulate than an educated and politically conscious one, which is why publications that are political or aimed at any kind of legal knowledge or education, like PLN, get singled out for censorship.

Seth: Do you feel like a crusader, why or why not?

Paul: Yes and no. No, because in many respects I think the American prison and jail system is so bad that if people knew what was going on things would improve. On the other hand, I think many people, even if they know, don't care. Hence, I feel like it is a crusade to bring change about in spite of the unpopularity of the cause.

Seth: Why have the prison presses and magazines stopped when there are more prisoners now than ever before?

Paul: Apathy and indifference are hard to combat. Illiteracy is a real killer for magazines too. One of PLN's strengths has been that none of its staff has ever had a background in professional publishing. If we had then we would have probably never started the magazine since in theory we should not exist. Other problems with why prison publications have pretty much gone under have been political infighting in some cases and the bigger issue is financial. There is little money in publishing a magazine aimed at prisoners, their family members and advocates. To do a decent job requires full time, professional staff and that requires money. PLN started out with a budget of \$50 and an all volunteer staff. We are now at a \$450,000 annual budget, six full-time employees, plus work study students and volunteers.

Prison Legal News is a vital and necessary publication for prisoners in America and the world at large. They print the decisions, cases and news that the mainstream media won't print. They keep prisoners, their

loved ones and those in the criminal justice and legal fields abreast of current situations and what is happening right now in prisons worldwide. To battle prison censorship is a very righteous cause. It is one that Paul Wright has embraced within the system and now on the outside. His efforts should be recognized and commended.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Seth Ferranti is the Gorilla Convict writer. He founded www.gorillaconvict.com from the penitentiary, while serving a 25 year sentence as a victim of America's misguided War on Drugs. Incarcerated since 1993 at the age of 22, Seth has grown into a man behind the fences. He has not let his imprisonment stop him from publishing two books – *Prison Stories* (2007) and *Street Legends* (2008) – and hundreds of articles in magazines like *Don Diva*, *Feds* and *Street Elements*. His first publication in the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*, “The American Dream: Free Enterprise”, appeared in Volume 10(1&2) in 1999. He has also published on websites like www.urbanhooksource.com and www.hoopshype.com. Check-out his work at www.gorillaconvict.com.