

# OREGON CURE

Citizens United for the Rehabilitation of Errants

The mission of Oregon CURE is to support the incarcerated and their families and friends by advocating for effective criminal justice policies and procedures.

Spring 2024, Volume 76

A Newsletter for Incarcerated People and their Families and Friends  
P.O. Box 80193, Portland, OR 97280 | (503) 844-9145

## **LET YOUR VOICE BE HEARD SPEAK TO YOUR LEGISLATIVE REPRESENTATIVES... THEY WORK FOR YOU!**

**The 2024 Legislative Session (known as the short session) began 2.5.24 and ended 3.7.24.**

**The dates for the next legislative session are April 14, 2025, through June 12, 2025.**

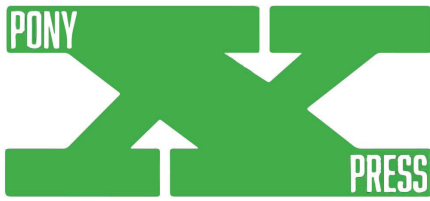
The following submission is from KCB in regards to the 2023 Legislative session. Looking back at the unfortunate way the 2023 Legislation ended due to the walkouts, the overall enthusiasm to pass the bills that Oregonians so desperately needed was apparent throughout this year's Legislative session.

As an advocate for improvement to our justice and carceral systems, I am happy to say that a number of bills passed that affect Oregon's children. Such as funding for summer school, vocational training, special education, childcare, homeless youth, and a study for improving the graduation rate of children in foster care – which is currently only 35%. Providing for and investing in services and education for children not only meets their immediate needs, but also impacts the number of adults whose futures could intersect with the legal system.

Opinions and ideas regarding homelessness, sustainable housing, behavioral health, addiction services, and public safety are best left for discussions amongst individuals. I will report that bills were passed in an effort to address the current state of all of them. As we have seen in the past, synchronizing implementation times, staffing and plan roll out are imperative to the success or failure of their implementations.

From a personal viewpoint, a number of bills aimed to create new crimes or enhance current crime categories, and I am happy to say that they did not pass. Incarceration has become our “catch all” solution to addressing society's problems and I am amiss as to why we don't look at the origin of the problems versus the pro-active approach that is consistently being used.

An impressive moment for me this session occurred at the last hearing the Joint Committee for Addictions and Public Safety held. The voting was about to commence for House Bill 4002, which addresses the impacts that Measure 110 created, and wanting his statement on record, Senator Prozanski voiced appreciation for the many meaningful improvements the bill contained, but that he would be a “no” vote today. He went on to say that there are elements of the bill that would negatively impact those that are already struggling, and he could not support that. In today's world people concede to agree solely due to majority opinion all the time. Courage is displayed when we oppose something that intellectually and ethically, we know it will be detrimental to people. It impresses me when we don't settle in times that are difficult.



**SUBSCRIPTIONS SUPPORT  
PROGRAMS INSIDE  
WWW.THEPONYXPRESS.ORG**

## LETTER TO OUR ANCESTORS

BY TRACY SCHLAPP

In 2022, Bridgeworks Oregon published *Prisons Have A Long Memory*, an anthology that compiled writing from fifteen people at Oregon State Penitentiary during the Covid lockdown. After the prison reopened, the project transformed. During spring 2023, Danny Wilson and I traveled to prisons in the state as we invited writers to join the PonyXpress journal and workshops. Combining writing across institutions creates conversations between people who otherwise are unable to meet — publishing on a website gives the public free access to this record.

While we were on the road, Nolan James Briden, one of our original writers and member of the Lakota Oyate-ki Culture Club, taught workshops to his peers to kickstart our efforts. The prompt “write a letter to an ancestor” provided us with the theme for Issue 1. During the past nine months, kytes have arrived from Baker City to Lakeview to Pendleton — even Ontario. Over three issues, we have published 170 original works and we have traveled through Oregon for dozens of face-to-face workshops. We celebrate the journal’s first birthday in July.

Subscribe for a weekly update of poetry, memoir, and essays delivered to your inbox. Generally letters are folded and contained — they are most often private messages intended for one reader. In his PonyXpress submission, Le’Var Howard addresses an ancestor call to Martin Luther King, Jr. who traveled through the world lighting the way with his words and through his actions. Le’Var recognizes his teacher, and the importance to holding up this vision for himself. Letter also bring us closer to our writers’ hearts. Hugh Crow II shares a letter to his great-grandfather: “I love you for the children you fathered.” A declaration that reminds us that the transit of love moves optimistically forward to our grandchildren’s children, but also travels back generations. This letter, like the writing we publish, bring us closer to our writers’ concerns, their hopes, and yes, sometimes their pain. These intimate messages act to reconcile what we know and don’t know about people we love, even when we have never met. | TDS

### BRIDGEWORKS OREGON

connects communities by creating art & musical experiences in prison and broadcasts the resulting work outside those walls. **PonyXpress Project** networks writers through workshops across the state and a platform to publish their work online. They partner with the prisoner-led Lakota Oyate-Ki Culture Club an editorial board of folks at OSP read, select, and edit submissions. In May 2024, Bridgeworks will publish PonyXpress writers on Edovo the free platform on prison tablets, along with self-guided writing curriculum. The project receives generous support from Oregon Community Foundation, Oregon Humanities, and Spirit Mountain Community Fund.

Learn more:

[www.bridgeworksoregon.org](http://www.bridgeworksoregon.org)

### TO A GREAT GRANDFATHER

BY HUGH CROW II

Oklahoma,

Did you lose a piece of your being on the Trail of Tears? Today I can say I’ve read books and found your name, once, on a website. I love you for the children you fathered. Whatever legacy each has left, I hope it honors where you’re from.

Please inform me, what kind of traditions do we hold in our households as a Cherokee people? I’m Christian, as many of us have become. Can you tell me how you perceive a loss of our identity, if that in fact exists in your understanding of things.

We’ve come far, and yet I know little of our tradition. Your sons who spoke our tongue have passed. I met one son on a farm in Muskogee before he passed — he was in his seventies. I’m sure you’d be proud.

**HUGH CROW II** WAS MOSTLY RAISED IN BEND, OREGON. HE IS AN ENROLLED AS A CHEROKEE TRIBAL CITIZEN ON HIS DAD’S SIDE, AND DUTCH FROM HIS MOTHER.

**NEW!**

**CHECK OUT**

**BRIDGEWORKS OREGON**

**ART & MUSIC**

**POSTED ON EDOVO IN MAY**

### A LETTER TO MLK

BY LE’VAR HOWARD

Dear Dr. King,

I am sorry to tell you that in spite of all your efforts and greater power of words and passion, I write to you (your descendant) as a slave — a slave to a long-standing system with which we have been at war since before either of us was born. A system well known to us for its oppression, violence, racism, and hypocrisy. But even worse, through no fault of yours, I did this to myself. At a young age, I began to intoxicate my mind with substances and committed to a harmful way of life, against myself and against others. I committed treasons against myself, and against God — our God, our skin.

I am so sorry.

The struggles of those (like yourself) were lost on me until I came to know wisdom in my middle years. It hurts to know the shame I have caused you and those who follow you.

I do, however, wish you could see what you’ve created. There are positives in this world thanks to you. People from all over the world have come to know your words; you will always be remembered and loved as people come to know you. On my own journey, I found it too hard to live up to your inspiration. You never committed heinous acts such as I have. I do try more now than ever.

Thank you for all you have given. Thank you for believing in me. Thank you for fighting when the world stood still. I will do my best to remember you and honor you with my craft, my work, and my gift.

Sincerely, a proud descendant of yours,

Le’Var Howard

**LE’VAR HOWARD** IS A PORTLAND, OREGON NATIVE. MOST OF HIS FAMILY COMES FROM GULFPORT, MISSISSIPPI, ATLANTA, TEXAS, AND OKLAHOMA. LE’VAR IS A FOUNDING MEMBER OF THE GROUND BENEATH US WRITING GROUP. HE TRACES INFLUENCES ON HIS WRITING TO HIS AFRICAN AMERICAN HERITAGE.

## THE INSIGHT ALLIANCE

This has been submitted by Anna Debenham, Founder and Program Director, Inside Alliance.

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Since 2016, The Insight Alliance has been transforming the lives of youth and adults impacted by the carceral system across Oregon by pointing them to their innate resilience and wellbeing. We serve our community's most overlooked individuals, supporting them as they work to overcome the many barriers they face during incarceration and after release. Our services include:

- **Insight to Wellbeing** – Our flagship program, Insight to Wellbeing is an evidence-based and data-driven group dialogue program that we offer to all our participants, including those incarcerated in Oregon's prisons and through our justice-related partners, as well as those who have returned to the community.
- **Resource Navigation** – Many of our participants receive resource navigation from a caring expert who provides general advocacy and support to ensure they receive the maximum benefit of our programming. Resource Navigators help clients pursue educational opportunities, find jobs through 2nd chance employers, access emergency funding, and other critical needs.
- **Transitional Housing** – We currently operate two transitional homes for those reentering the community. Participants can live in these homes at no-cost for up to two years, so long as they remain in recovery and actively participate in the provided services.
- **Peer Mentorships** – We work with trained peer mentors who provide supportive relationships and a sense of community, supporting our participants in their personal journeys. Moreover, we connect our participants with mentors who have lived through similar experiences, such as incarceration or struggling with addiction, allowing for trust to be built and deep connections. Peer mentors support our participants with their overall well-being, helping them in times of crisis and guiding them to key resources and services.

Our flagship program, **Insight to Wellbeing**, teaches a simple understanding of how thoughts, feelings, and state of mind work. We believe that no one is broken and that everyone has everything inside of them to live a healthy and productive life. It is simply our role to point out that innate wellbeing, and to draw it out of people. The fundamental premise of our program is to create the best possible space for a "quiet mind" so that participants can experience an intuitive understanding as opposed to learning something at a rational level.

**Insight to Wellbeing has been proven in peer reviewed research to help people in the following ways:**

- Decrease in anxiety, depression, anger, and agitation.
- Less prone to violence and to reactions when upset or angry.
- Decrease in the obsession with own circumstances.
- Decrease in response to trigger situations.
- Increase in Stress Resistance needed to cope with trauma.
- Increase in emotional regulation and impulse control.
- Increase in pro-social behaviors and connectedness.
- Increased or improved relationships with family, and relationships with others.

The unique quality we bring to this work is our neutral approach that supports healing and transformation for all community members, regardless of who they are or where they come from. We know the most powerful agent of change in any community is the minds of the people living in it. No living being is in isolation and the health of all our minds affects the systems that guide our society. Thoughts can (and do) change, therefore experience can also change. Our approach of helping people to understand how thought systems work opens up endless possibilities for connection and understanding, as people become more aware of their biases or deep-seated beliefs. If we can change minds, we can also change our local communities and address the myriad of complex issues we face - from gun violence to mass incarceration. Insight to Wellbeing is offered at 5 institutions and 2 schools. This includes Coffee Creek Correctional Facility (Minimum and Medium), Columbia River Correctional Institution, Oak Creek Youth Correctional Facility, MacLaren Youth Correctional Facility, Northwest Regional Reentry, Alice Ott Middle School (David Douglas School District), and Tigard High School (Tigard-Tualatin School District). We also run our 10-week program in the community for our targeted population on a regular basis.

# IN LOCO PARENTIS: CAN PRISONS BECOME SCHOOLS OF MORAL DEVELOPMENT?

**Scott Spencer-Wolff, PhD**

The clang of prison doors and the grim image of bars paint a familiar picture of punishment. But a surprising truth lies beneath this stereotype. For many incarcerated individuals, prison becomes an unintended substitute for the childhood environment they never had. Raised in circumstances of neglect, abuse, or abandonment – experiences we call Childhood Traumatic Experiences (CTEs) – incarcerated individuals often lack the emotional and social development necessary for empathy, respect for others, and long-term planning or Executive Function skills (Memory, Cognition, Emotional and Inhibitory Control, Planning, Organizing, and Prioritizing – are all examples of Executive Function Skills.). Could prisons, traditionally focused on punishment, transform into environments that foster moral and emotional growth and genuine personal change? Often seen as enforcers, can correctional officers become agents of positive change by providing the prosocial modeling that many incarcerated individuals desperately need? Is it unreasonable to suggest that the system itself must be responsible for building a culture and practices of institutional accountability for its own behavior? Practices that are at least consistent with the requirements the average parole/post-prison officer expects of a recently released client? Where else are the formally incarcerated supposed to learn how to navigate the complexities of our society with anything that even resembles integrity? For those in the prison system, this has become one of the roles prisons are tasked with.

## **The Scars that Shape Us: Childhood Trauma and Crime**

Childhood traumatic experiences (CTEs) are more than just events that happen in the past; they leave indelible marks that shape how we interact with and organize our experience of the world around us. While they don't excuse future behavior, they undeniably influence our choices and behaviors, sometimes unexpectedly. Imagine a thirteen-year-old at a middle school dance. He musters up the courage to ask a girl to dance, only to be met with a blunt "No." This seemingly insignificant rejection triggers a wave of shame within him, a feeling filtered through the lens of his developmental stage. The incident lingers in the young man's mind and creates a filter through which all future events will be seen, often completely unconsciously. This seemingly trivial experience becomes a brushstroke on the canvas of his emotional landscape, shaping his future interactions.

Fast forward twenty-five years. The young man, now an adult, carries the faint echoes of that middle school dance. He might be hesitant to take risks, harbor a fear of rejection, or struggle with putting himself out emotionally or romantically. These could all stem from a deep-seated concern about what others might think, a concern rooted in that one childhood experience. The example of a school dance is a simplistic one. The damage done to many incarcerated men and women goes far, far beyond easy descriptions. It's hard for many of us, raised in fairly normal households (albeit with the occasional difficulties), to even imagine a seven-year-old being sold for prostitution by their meth-addicted parents. Or parents who used their early teen children as sexual surrogates. Or parents who didn't care, leaving children to fend for themselves for long periods. Or any number of the other even more horrible stories that we read about when we are reviewing clemency or parole board petitions. Where do we expect these individuals to get some exposure to a moral code that will allow them to navigate the complexities and demands of modern life outside of prison?

Equally important to development are the Executive function Skills. Our brains use powerful cognitive tools to plan, organize, monitor, remember, and control our behavior and thoughts. Executive function (EF) is the umbrella term that describes the set of fifteen cognitive skills used flexibly to direct goal-oriented behavior in new or unfamiliar situations. We use executive functions to manage and regulate our thinking, feelings, and behaviors. These fifteen skills are generally combined into three essential categories: working memory, cognitive flexibility, and inhibitory control. EF skills are not innate. We are not born with them. They are learned through the modeling of parents or caregivers and lessons in school supplemented by life experiences.

What we're seeing are people being incarcerated who have no parental models or who, through houselessness, constant moving, residual cognitive difficulties from being born addicted (called Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS)), or a complete lack of parental interest, were never in school programs consistently enough to pick up the lessons offered.

We banter the word rehabilitation around as if it means something. It doesn't. Re·ha·bil·i·ta·tion [ˌrē(h)əˌbɪlᵻˈtāʃən] the action of restoring someone to health or normal life through training and therapy after imprisonment, addiction, or

illness. The problematic word is restoring. A large number of our incarcerated friends have nothing positive to be restored to. To make our incarcerated friends employable, good citizens, critical thinkers, emotionally self-reflective, personally trustworthy, and possessing common sense and meaningful ideas is a lot to expect of people who have never been exposed to those skillsets and are living in a prison system that collectively, systemically – is lacking in those moral skills and qualities itself.

Our task becomes habilitation – not rehabilitation.

### **Breaking the Cycle: From Trauma to Transformation**

The Junior High dance example highlights the potential for even seemingly minor events to leave lasting impacts. How would an adolescent with the residual of multiple CTEs and a significant lack of modeling of executive functioning organize their world? The word adolescence shares an intimate relationship with the word adult: both come from the same Latin verb, *adolescere*, which means ‘to grow up.’ We’re a little fuzzy on what “grow up” means and a lot fuzzy on just how that is supposed to happen.

While “adults in custody” has become popular in Oregon - it’s just a marketing term. While people of a certain chronological age earn the designation of “adults” so they can drive or legally drink - chronological age doesn’t really mean a lot when the worldview, interpersonal skills, and treatment of adults in custody pegs them at early stage adolescents. Many of the folks running the correctional show don’t clearly understand what the adult psychological organization of the world would look like. “Do it because I told you to.” “Piss me off or disrespect me, and you’ll regret it.” “Keep that up, and I’ll have you transferred to the other side of the state so you never see your family.” When a culture of prison management and control is designed around the same emotional level as school bullies, it’s unreasonable to expect very useful results in making self-critical adults capable of navigating the complexities of modern life. We can do better.

When prison staff adopt a derisive attitude towards certain classes of crimes, mirroring the projected anxiety of the incarcerated toward those same folks, we’ve lost any moral high ground we may have had. Professional adults realize that people do bad things, sometimes terrible things, but our focus isn’t on that—it’s on how to mitigate any threat they may pose and then how to address whatever caused them to behave the way they did. Not hard to understand.

When prison staff collaborates with Adults in Custody to torment certain people for any reason, it’s a throwback to juvenile behavior - and a confirmation of the belief that authority is no better than the rest of us. We can do better. We can be better.

For so many incarcerated folks, and especially the youngsters and frequent fliers to the hole and solitary time, the question they don’t even know they’re asking is, “Whaddaya want from me?” Prison Staff want to believe that he will care about what they care about...even to the extent of subordinating some of his own particular interests and experiences. Prison staff wants the person to subordinate their self-interest to the needs and value of a set of relationships and cultural agreements, so they can play nicely with the other kids in the sandbox. Prison staff (ostensibly ‘society’) want him to develop empathy and self-insight. All of these could be possible if they were explained and modeled so our incarcerated friend knew what they were talking about.

If an adult in custody does not yet construct this way of knowing, the difficulty might be more a matter of not understanding the rules of the game than one of an unwillingness to play, a refusal to play, or an inability to play a game he or she nonetheless does understand. These disappointing inmates may be in over their heads, and their situation is all the more dangerous because of being misunderstood by the prison staff, whose expectations they are disappointing, whose primary tools are either threats or violence and who, in many cases, do not have the cognitive capacity themselves to model what it is they want. We all feel much less sympathetic toward people we think are giving us grief because they choose to than toward people we think have let us down because they cannot do otherwise.

Imagine you're building a house of cards: you're making your own card tower and trying to see how other people are building theirs. But sometimes, it's hard to balance both tasks. You may focus more on your own tower, even if you want to understand others. Understanding others seems less of a priority because you don’t feel anyone has taken the time to understand you.

This balancing act can be especially tough. There's a gap between what the world expects us to understand and what we're actually able to grasp, contextualize, and make meaning from. It's like being asked to solve a really hard math problem when you're just starting to learn basic arithmetic. This gap can make us seem self-centered, defensive, or uncaring because those are all attitudes that have worked for us in the past to keep us safe from the trauma and drama of our early lives. Along with the belief that authority can't be trusted and if we don't protect ourselves, no one else will.

Imagine the impact of major abuses and abandonment. When considering the criminal justice system, the influence of CTEs becomes even more profound. Studies consistently show a strong link between childhood trauma and involvement in crime. Individuals who have experienced abuse, neglect, or other forms of trauma are more likely to find themselves incarcerated compared to those who haven't. This shouldn't be news to anyone who's in the corrections business. And yet, it seems to be.

It is not necessarily bad that adults in custody are over their heads. In fact, it may be just what is called for, provided the AICs also experience effective support. Such supports constitute a holding environment that provides acknowledgment of exactly who the person is right now and fosters developmental transformation by which (how I am) becomes gradually a part of (how I was) and a whole new (how I am now).

One key lies in understanding how these experiences shape behavior. CTEs can disrupt healthy emotional and social development, leading to difficulties with impulse control, anger and frustration management, and forming healthy relationships [3]. These challenges can push individuals towards risky behaviors, substance abuse, and, ultimately, criminal activity. However, recognizing this connection is the first step towards breaking the cycle.

### **Healing the Past, Shaping the Future**

By acknowledging the link between CTEs and incarceration, we can develop effective in-custody interventions. Early intervention programs that identify and address childhood trauma and promote healthy emotional development can play a crucial role in reducing crime rates. Additionally, providing trauma-informed care within the correctional system can equip inmates with the tools they need to be aware of a need for healing from past experiences and build a more positive future. Ultimately, our goal is to move beyond simply managing criminal behavior; we want to empower individuals to overcome the lasting effects of trauma and build a life filled with opportunity and purpose. Given the current correctional state of affairs in Oregon and elsewhere in the United States, how is this possible?

**In Loco Parentis**, is a Latin term that means in place of the parents. Parental figures don't have to be biological parents, foster parents, step-parents, or any other iteration of parenthood – parental figures can be anyone who cares and who has already navigated some of the difficulties of growing up, making mistakes, overcoming those mistakes, and adjusting in any of the countless ways adults adjust to a transition into adulthood with all its complex, conflicting demands, and expectations. In my own incarceration experience, I have known exceptional prison staff who were capable of just that. These were often veterans who had experienced their share of trauma and recognized that working to help others heal helped to heal themselves. They cared, within the parameters they were allowed to care, and used the language of care, concern, and responsibility to convey a positive belief in one's potential and a positive expectation that one was capable of better things. Adults in Custody with tattoos of "Born to Die" or "Born to Lose" didn't just come by that self-description by accident. Recognition that we can all move on through and past our traumas may be one of a Correctional officer's job description bullet points, further supported by an administration in tune with the idea of creating a work environment where people want and are motivated to make a conscious positive difference in the lives of some people.

### **Learning by Example: The Power and Pitfalls**

Children learn by observing and imitating the behavior of those around them. This principle, known as social learning theory, holds true even for adults. Within the confines of prison, correctional staff become de facto parents, shaping inmates' behavior and moral compass through their daily interactions. A harsh, punitive culture that breeds violence, disrespect, and a lack of accountability only reinforces negative patterns, further entrenching inmates in a cycle of criminal behavior. We model what we see. A 2019 study published in the Journal of

Correctional Education found a direct link between exposure to tolerance for violence and aggression by staff within prisons and higher rates of recidivism. Not surprising. We model what we see.

### **The Burden of Untreated Mental Illness**

The issue of mental health in correctional facilities is a complex and often overlooked one. A significant portion of the incarcerated population grapples with severe mental health issues, rendering prison an ill-equipped environment to address their needs. Studies by the Bureau of Justice Statistics indicate that over 44% of jail inmates and 43% of state prisoners have a mental illness. These individuals often struggle with conditions like schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and major depressive disorder. Prisons, however, are not equipped to provide the level of treatment and support these conditions require. Limited access to qualified mental health professionals, coupled with a lack of money, resources, and specialized facilities, leaves these vulnerable individuals with inadequate support. They pose a threat to staff and AICs alike.

Furthermore, the very structure of prison rules is often designed around mitigating the potential dangers posed by mentally ill inmates, prioritizing staff and inmate safety rather than genuine habilitation. Solitary confinement, a common punishment for disruptive behavior, can be particularly detrimental for those with mental illness, exacerbating symptoms and leading to further isolation and despair. Additionally, restrictive routines and limited access to therapeutic activities can hinder emotional regulation and contribute to outbursts. This creates a vicious cycle where the behaviors stemming from untreated mental illness are met with punitive responses, further entrenching the problem.

Addressing the mental health needs of the incarcerated population is a critical step toward creating a more humane and effective correctional system. Diversion programs that channel individuals with mental illness toward treatment facilities rather than prisons are essential. Additionally, increased resources for in-prison mental health services, coupled with staff training in de-escalation techniques and mental health awareness, can create a more supportive environment for those struggling.

However, the potential for positive influence exists. Prisons with cultures that emphasize respect, responsibility, and rehabilitation offer a lifeline. Imagine a correctional officer who calmly de-escalates a volatile situation rather than resorting to force. This act of conflict resolution becomes a powerful teaching moment, demonstrating the power of reason over aggression. Such positive role models can plant the seeds of moral development, inspiring inmates to break free from destructive cycles and move them to increased capacities for executive functions. A 2020 study published in the *Prison Journal* found that inmates housed in units with strong social programs and positive staff interactions demonstrated significantly lower levels of aggression and higher levels of prosocial behavior. The staff are responsible for that change and set the lead in making it happen.

I don't think it's uncommon for potential correctional officers to come to the job with a sense of, "I'm doing this so I can make a difference in people's lives." And so they do. What becomes a problem is the eventual shift into a dramatic us/them model. Part of the psychological reason this happens is projection, which occurs when a prison officer begins to see themselves in certain inmate behaviors and has to reinforce their perception – "I am not one of them." A couple of great academic papers have been written about the mirroring of staff/inmate culture, where each side is trying to outdo the other in what they can get away with. Who can be sneakier? Who can be more criminally creative? It's not a contest. It's a dysfunctional way of being that reflects back on the Adult in Custody's earliest years and reinforces beliefs that the "system" is something to get over, and if you can – you win somehow. Don't be this person, regardless of what color uniform you're wearing.

### **The Trauma of Staff Culture**

There have always been officers who were temperamentally not suited to working with people over whom they have absolute control. The FBI/DOJ issued a report a number of years back that said a third of LEOs would never do anything wrong—totally straight arrows. A second-third of LEOs have personal issues that render them unsuitable for carrying a gun or having that kind of control over people's lives, and the last third can go either way and use the culture of the agency they belong to define their personal accountability standards. As has long been a given, "absolute power corrupts absolutely."



There is a short list of factors behind this: greed and opportunity, financial stress, connections with 'shady' people, extramarital relationships with coworkers or others, alcohol or drug addiction, and just being the wrong candidate for this kind of position. A bonus reason is trying to cover for another, which never bodes well for either person. All of these things happen - it's a given, but how it's managed and what lessons are learned is the basis for redemption.

How much could incarcerated folks learn about adulting if staff (of all levels) owned what negatives they have created for themselves, took accountability, and offered the stories (within reason) as instructional material for at least some of the prison community?

Prison administrations have had to deal with unions and the challenges of trying to fire or replace someone with a history of problematic behavior and attitudes towards the incarcerated (or towards other staff, as has often been the case even recently in Oregon, where millions of dollars in TORT payouts have been made to employees for knuckle-dragging misogyny and plain, old retribution.) None of that is very conducive to innovation or creative thinking. Likewise, if the prison administration resists transparency, has an excuse for everything, considers 'accountability' good for everyone except themselves, and operational daylight to be like garlic to a vampire, the trickle-down culture isn't going to be positive. Taking risk-averse positions on everything lends itself to a culture where everyone fears trying anything new.

One of my favorite quotes is still, "In an ordinary organization, most people are doing a second job no one is paying them for. Most people spend time and energy covering up their weaknesses within large and small organizations, government agencies, schools, hospitals, and churches. They manipulate other people's impressions of them, show themselves to their best advantage, play politics, and hide their inadequacies, uncertainties, and limitations. This may be the most significant loss of resources that organizations suffer daily." (Robert Kegan, *An Everyone Culture*)

Let's face it: prisons aren't generally known for fostering warm fuzzies. There's an undeniable allure to the "absolute power corrupts absolutely" adage, and yes, some folks probably shouldn't be put in charge of a goldfish, let alone a cell block.

But here's the thing: blame games are about as effective as shivs in a pillow fight. Pointing fingers at unions, administrations, or the occasional knuckle-dragging behavior (loving that term, by the way) isn't going to rebuild anything.

It's time to ditch the "cover your weaknesses" mentality I mentioned. Imagine a prison environment where staff and inmates are encouraged to grow, learn from mistakes (because, let's be honest, everyone makes them!), and maybe even laugh a little. Crazy, right? There are crazy people in prison, but their craziness isn't directed at anyone in particular, so chill the ego. Likewise, some people have issues with authority – it's the result of their life experience, and it doesn't need to be a direct affront to you. Check testosterone levels at the door.

A supportive, well-trained staff is good for everyone's mental health and public safety. Management and administration need to think about more than their next career opportunity. The culture needs to move upward in enthusiasm. Line staff feel ignored, yet those may be the folks with the best ideas. Think about it. Who are you more likely to listen to: the guard yelling or the one who calmly explains the situation?

There are dangerous people in prisons—that's why there are prisons. What's the story you're telling yourself about that? Honestly, there are dangerous people everywhere. There are lots of well-thought-out strategies for dealing with dangerous people. However, one of the perks of the job of "Corrections" is trying to see if dangerous people can be transformed into not-so-dangerous people. I have confidence that, with rare exceptions, it can be done.

Let's consider rewriting the prison narrative. Let's trade the fight-or-flight responses for a chance to build something positive together because a prison sentence may become a stepping stone to more than a dead end. And who knows, someday those prison walls might not just hold people in but also offer the seeds of personal insight.



# CELLBLOCKS TO MOUNTAINTOPS

A New Podcast and Video Series

Interrogating the Criminal Justice System Through the Lens of One Man's Journey

Portland, Oregon, Feb. 19, 2024 / Narrative Alchemy, in partnership with PRX and Sonic Union, is thrilled to announce its new podcast and video series, Cellblocks to Mountaintops launching February 29th, 2024.

**Stunning Storytelling**  
★★★★★  
"This podcast is gripping, enlightening, and interesting"

**Truly Inspiring**  
★★★★★  
"A rare and exceptional find"

**Spellbinding!**  
★★★★★  
"Perfect for a road trip because you will want to binge listen"

**A Must Listen!**  
★★★★★  
"Once I started listening to Cellblocks, I could not stop. Plus I watched all of the companion videos. It is a beautifully told, poignant, heart-wrenching narrative that asks all the right questions about the US prison system, redemption, and human worth."

**Wow**  
★★★★★  
"A great way to learn about our broken system . . . this podcast is eye-opening . . . Highly recommend for fans of true crime who are open to learning about restorative justice."

Cellblocks to Mountaintops is an innovative 8 episode podcast with 14 mini-documentary companion videos. The show examines the punitive criminal justice system, the systemic factors that plague it and the potential of restorative justice, told through the lens of one man's transformation and his relentless pursuit of freedom.  
[www.cellblockstomountaintops.com](http://www.cellblockstomountaintops.com)

This narrative series is about the grace of human transformation, the search for redemption, and the current state of the U.S. criminal justice system. Cellblocks to Mountaintops will appeal to fans of criminal justice podcasts. It also provides an entry point into the world of restorative justice for fans of the true crime genre who want to understand how and why violence is perpetuated, and how the system fails victims, offenders, and the community at large.

Years after committing a horrible crime, Sterling Cunio continues to confront the ripple effects of his actions. Through artistic expression, human connection, and the principles of restorative justice, he forges a personal transformation while incarcerated. As Cunio explains: "Long ago I realized that I might already be everywhere that I will ever be. Thus, my daily purpose is to bloom where planted, and hope that decades of tiny acts of kindness have enough redemptive value to leave a legacy that is defined by more than my most tragic failure at humanity."

Originally a documentary film, this eight-episode podcast includes first of its kind companion videos, which dive deeper into the Sterling's journey. These fourteen "mini-documentaries" take listeners behind-the-scenes into prison, where they can watch the story unfold. The series is hosted by Phil Stockton, a seasoned actor who has taught theater in numerous correctional facilities. Listeners will join him as he speaks with Sterling and other incarcerated individuals at Oregon State Penitentiary in Salem, Oregon, as well as experts in criminal, restorative, and transformative justice.

This trailblazing series was created by award winning filmmaker Lydia B. Smith in association with Narrative Alchemy, a small nonprofit based in Portland, Oregon that illuminates stories of change. Her previous film, *Walking the Camino: Six Ways to Santiago*, was the #12 documentary in theaters in 2014, garnered a 90% rating on Rotten Tomatoes, and had over 1.2 million viewers on PBS stations nationwide. Smith has also produced multiple documentaries for CNN, PBS, and international television stations. Smith spent seven years following Sterling's journey. "My intention is that this project will similarly inspire others to reconsider their ideas about responsibility, accountability and forgiveness- in their own lives, in their communities, and in our correctional system," said Smith.

This story is a poignant reminder that hope, healing, and redemption are never beyond reach, even in the darkest of places. To view the podcast and video trailers, please visit [cellblockstomountaintops.com](http://cellblockstomountaintops.com). Subscribe now on Apple Podcasts or wherever you get your podcasts. Media Contact: [contact@cellblockstomountaintops.com](mailto:contact@cellblockstomountaintops.com)

## OMBUDS CORNER

Oregon OMBUDS Office... The Oregon OMBUDS, Adrian Wulff, is up and running, although start-up has remained slow. The biggest completed project has been a comprehensive report to the Legislature on the challenges of the AIC phone system, especially the complex verification process, and the beginning of a discussion about the possibility of free phones. That said, progress is being made on other things. Please don't be discouraged if you have written or left a message. There is no one to help with this at this point, but documentation is critical. Here is the contact if you have an issue or concern that you believe the OMBUDS office needs to be aware of.

HOTLINE: 888-685-6842

EMAIL: [DOC.OMBUDS@oregon.gov](mailto:DOC.OMBUDS@oregon.gov)

Attn: Oregon Corrections OMBUDS

900 Court Street, NE, Suite 254

Salem OR 97301-4047

The system is being set up so all inquiries, reports, suggestions, etc., will be responded to more promptly. Remember that for Adults in Custody, the internal GRIEVANCE process MUST be followed before the OMBUDS office can get involved. However, to keep tabs on issues, any information you have regarding problems, challenges, or situations is beneficial to know about.

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## SHOP & SUPPORT OREGON CURE

You can benefit Oregon CURE when you shop at any Kroger/Fred Meyer Store. Simply sign up at [Kroger.com](https://www.kroger.com). link your shopper's card if you already have one or sign up for one and choose Oregon CURE as the organization you wish to benefit from your shopping with each transaction.

Once you sign up, any transaction you make moving forward using your membership Shoppers Card number will benefit Oregon CURE at no expense to you. Kroger will donate a percentage of what you spend with them to Oregon CURE. What a great way to benefit our non-profit.

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## SUPPORT US IN OTHER WAYS

Oregon Cure appreciates your donations and support. Click to see the full QR code and scan to go directly to our PayPal link.



### HOW DOES YOUR DONATION HELP?

It pays for our phone service, post office box, and postage to correspond with those who write to us, both in the free world and the incarcerated, it pays to print and mail our newsletters, and it pays for our non-profit status.

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## MEMBERSHIP RENEWAL

Your membership renewal date is on the address label of this newsletter. If your renewal date is expired, we ask that you please renew today to continue to receive this newsletter and to continue to support our organization.

**You can also make a donation for someone you know to become a member. Your support is important to our mission and your donation is tax-deductible.**

Send your membership tax-deductible donation to Oregon CURE, PO Box 80193, Portland, OR 97280.

Please fill out the member donation form below to receive our newsletter. Adult in custody subscription donation is \$3 and Individual Non-Incarcerated subscription donation is \$15. **All tax-deductible donations are greatly appreciated and can be made in any amount. Visit our website at [oregoncure.org](http://oregoncure.org).**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_  
(optional)

City/State/Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of incarcerated loved one / SID & facility: \_\_\_\_\_

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## PUBLICATION NOTICE

This newsletter is a publication of Oregon CURE. Oregon CURE is a 501 (c)(3) organization whose goal is to reduce crime through criminal justice reform. The opinion and statements contained in this newsletter are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of Oregon CURE.

Contributions of articles, letters to the editor, notices, etc. are welcome but may be edited or rejected for space. Articles may be copied in their entirety with credit to the author or to the publication. Oregon CURE is an all-volunteer organization that is not a service organization. Do not send us any legal documents, we are not a legal service. We are not qualified to assist you with legal matters.

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## RELEASE ORIENTATIONS

Release Orientations are co-facilitated by Community Corrections and Oregon CURE. Find out how you can help your recently or soon-to-be-released loved one successfully re-enter our communities. Before attending, please phone one of the county coordinators' departments listed below to confirm the date, time, and location.

### Washington County

Contact: Michelle Scholl (503) 846-3455

### Marion County

Contact: Austin Herman (503) 540-8043

## INTAKE ORIENTATIONS

Intake Orientations are co-facilitated by the Oregon Department of Corrections and Oregon CURE. Find out about Oregon's prison system, the intake process, phones, mail, and visiting requirements. There will be opportunities to ask questions and learn how you can get through your loved one's incarceration. Please email for Zoom link prior to meeting:  
[oregoncure@gmail.com](mailto:oregoncure@gmail.com) or [admin@oregoncure.com](mailto:admin@oregoncure.com)

7PM-7:30PM First Wednesdays via Zoom

### Portland Metro

Location: Varies - please call Oregon CURE to confirm: (503) 844-9145 or email [oregoncure@gmail.com](mailto:oregoncure@gmail.com)

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Oregon CURE  
7805 SW 40<sup>th</sup> Ave.  
PO Box 80193  
Portland, OR 97280

**ATTENTION:**

Your address label has printed your renewal-date, below your name. This will be your last newsletter if your renewal date has passed. Renew today to remain informed!



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**SUPPORT GROUPS**

Oregon CURE support groups are intended for adult family members and friends only. Some topics of discussion may not be suitable for small children or pre-teens. Attend a support group and network with family members who have “been there”.

Some of these support groups meet via zoom and some meet in person. Please reach out with the contact information given below as you are planning to attend, or if you have any questions. There is no limit to which of or how often you attend a support group, nor is there a location requirement, if you are interested in attending a support group, we welcome you to do so.

Each meeting offers different insights and valuable information, and you are not required to share anything at all, if you do not wish to, simply listen and learn from other attendees.

**Portland East Side Support Group**

Varies & flexible – please call if interested.

Please call Ray at (503) 421-0269.

[RayAllenFox@gmail.com](mailto:RayAllenFox@gmail.com)

**Eugene Support Groups**

1<sup>st</sup> Thursdays: 6:30-8:30pm

Please call to confirm location.

Dave (541) 344-7612 or Don (541) 521-2231

**Zoom Support Group**

1<sup>st</sup> Wednesdays: 7:00-8:30pm

Please email for Zoom link prior to meeting.

[oregoncure@gmail.com](mailto:oregoncure@gmail.com) or [admin@oregoncure.com](mailto:admin@oregoncure.com)

**Salem Support Group**

1<sup>st</sup> Saturdays: 9:30-11:30am

The Keizer Senior Center

930 Plymouth Drive NE, Keizer, OR 97303

Wayne (971) 432-0148