

Prisoners Legal Service 20th Anniversary

What is Possible?

August 10th 2005

I wish to acknowledge the traditional land owners of this country – Aboriginal people. I would like to show my respects to Aboriginal people and thank them for allowing me to walk on their beautiful land.

I would like to acknowledge the prisoners who have passed before us. I would like to acknowledge prisoners here tonight and family members of prisoners.

I would like to make a special acknowledgment to Wayne Weaver – a lifer – now in the free world – a man who spent time here in Boggo Road for many years.

Thanks to Prisoners Legal Service (PLS) for the invitation to speak tonight and congratulations on your 20th birthday tonight.

Firstly I would like us all to take a moment to think of all the people in Queensland in prison cells tonight – over 5,000 – and imagine what they are doing at this moment. The majority would have been locked down in their cell for the next 12 hours – alone – thinking of their children, family, and friends. Knowing that they cannot touch them speak to them as we can tonight if we choose to do so.

I'd like to extend my congratulations to PLS and to everyone who has been involved in it over the past 20 years, to toast its many achievements and the courage and fortitude of those who have contributed to them.

But tonight I want to go further than talking about achievements and talk about **what is possible.**

I guess I feel I might be in a position to know what is possible because once, I was one of the people that PLS was formed to assist.

I did several years inside Boggo Road and at the time, if you'd told me I'd one day be standing up in front of a big bunch of lawyers and PLS supporters as their guest speaker, not as a prisoner but in my own right, I'd have told you: you're dreaming.

There were times inside that prison when just survival, pure and simple, was what I hoped for. Like many people who go to prison, I went through a stage when the injustices, the violence, the brutality, the unfairness, the desperation all became one thing: hopelessness.

A feeling that no one could possibly understand what I had gone through and, even if they did, they could not or would not stand up for me. or even **stand with me.**

But a few extraordinary events – and extraordinary people – intervened.

thirteen years after walking out of Boggo Road, I have a social work degree, half a law degree, qualifications in psychotherapy, I'm the director of a community organisation just voted the best in Australia – and the powers that be have even seen fit to hand me an order of Australia and a National Human Rights medal .

Sometimes it amazes me just to say that. I know it amazes other people – especially those who knew me when I was inside. The thing I'm most proud of though is the thing that is the hardest to articulate. It's kind of the sum of all those other things and that is the huge privilege I now have in being a voice for women in prison.

Unless you've been inside, or have intimate knowledge of the system and its horrors, you have no idea of how efficiently the system robs people of their voice. Sometimes, it's done with deadly efficiency – but I'll come back to that.

Losing your freedom means losing all your human rights but the loss of your voice may be the most tragic, the most devastating. Without being too dramatic about it, it's like screaming, knowing no one will hear you. Yelling knowing it's useless. The system does this in many covert ways. One of them is in the simple geographic placement of correctional centres.

Governments might tell fearful communities that prisons are built on the outskirts of town to protect them, and where there is land available for the necessary buffer zones but the real effect of course is isolation – out of sight, out of mind. and in that forgotten territory – physical and spiritual – prisons are forgotten. prisoners are forgotten and abuse breeds.

Any of you who have worked with prisoners will have had the singular experience of driving out west of Brisbane to 'institution row'. Trees, open grassland, razor wire. and silence. Many things about that area send shivers up my spine. But the silence is the thing that wraps around my heart and chills it, even now. Even after countless thousands of drives out there. Even with my son's music turned up loud in the car. I think it's because it isn't just a silence of landscape, but another kind of silence that envelopes those places and makes them so frightening. That's the silence that we're all party to about the shocking realities of prison existence, and of the lives of those behind the wire.

It's the silence that keeps people believing that people who go to prison are bad people.

It's the silence that keeps people believing prisons protect them from harm.

It's the silence that keeps people believing that those bad people in prison get privileges, they get educated and fed and they get rehabilitated. Given another chance to be good.

The silence that makes people believe we live in a just society.

Well, let me talk about **bad** people going to prison. I was in prison and while you can say many things about me, i am not a bad person. I'd even go so far as to say I am a **good** person and the vast majority of women in prison are just like me.

Let me talk about keeping the community from harm. Is that what we did when we imprisoned the chief magistrate? Is that what we did when we imprisoned 18 year-old Katie for traffic offences? Katie is the daughter of a woman, my friend, who was murdered in prison just over the hill from where we sit tonight. She spent much of her time, before sisters inside intervened through lawyers, in isolation – the detention unit. In the lock-up - for traffic offences.

But I'm sure you all slept more soundly because she was there.

And let me talk about privilege and privileges. When I think about the things prisoners get and don't get in prison, the word 'privilege' doesn't exactly jump into my head. When i think about 'privilege', in fact, I think of all of you out there in front of me tonight. **you – we** – are the privileged ones. We start by having privileged lives – lives not tainted by deprivation and abuse. The vast majority of people inside, as you know, can't claim that. We also have an education. Not just any old education, but a law degree and all the information and power – and the **voice** - that it entails. Many of you use that privilege to great effect in the work you do for prisoners and their families.

But tonight I want to suggest that you can use it more - more widely, more loudly. To much greater effect.

I acknowledge and I applaud the work you do advising people about their legal rights and about what is lawful and legal. But i would also urge you to use your voice to talk about what is **just and fair**. In other words to look beyond the work you do for individuals –

the wonderful work you do in individual cases – and to use your knowledge, your access to prisoners and their conditions, and your power, to advocate powerfully, to argue against the **systemic** wrongs perpetrated every day against the individuals within it.

We all need to challenge these systemic abuses, and to scrutinise the failure of the legal system to stop the abuse, the torture and the deep distress perpetrated against people who are the most vulnerable in our society.

Indigenous people, people with mental and physical disabilities, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds – women - those who have suffered the torments of severe disadvantage and abuse. These people have no voice. They know no one cares. They know that if they dared to speak, the system will have its retribution.

As you probably know, Sisters Inside has been trying to provide a voice for women in prison for the past 14 years. We've achieved that in a variety of ways. The **vital** ingredient, we believe, has been our insistence on maintaining women in prison as part of our management committee structure.

Sisters Inside has always been run for and by women inside. This has provided them with a voice so important and so effective that the current government has tried to shut us down.

Uncomfortable truths are revealed when the most powerless find their voice.

Facts and figures unpalatable to governments are exposed.

It becomes very hard for secrecy to maintain a hold when those who witness its abuses every day get to tell it like it is.

This is what has given Sisters Inside its authenticity, its authority. And it is the achievement of which I am most proud.

It is obviously the thing that most irritates the government because in June last year (2004) they began a process of dismantling the organisation by stealth.

First was a general lock-out of our services, then a limitation on services and on their location and on the women who can access them. Then came a ban on our Management Committee meetings - which have been held monthly inside the prison since the organisation began. Then the trump card: after the publication of my biography in April this year, I was personally locked out of the prison.

So I know that when I urge you to be more pro-active, to advocate more, to scrutinise more, to argue more, that I am talking about risky business indeed. Speaking out – on behalf of those the community sees as ‘the other’ – is going to bring you under scrutiny yourself. When they hear you raise your voice, they’re going to try to silence it.

But more than ever, those with the privilege of a combined and powerful voice, an educated and informed voice, need to use it, loud and clear.

Make no mistake: they want you to be silent. They don’t want you to lead. They don’t want you to say the kinds of things that might thrust forward a Cornelia Rau, or the shocking conditions inside Townsville women’s prison that you might have read about in today’s paper.

They may very well try on you the treatment they’ve tried on Sisters Inside and on prisoners across Queensland daily shut up or pack up. We’ve refused to do either. Because my singular privilege is having lived both lives – on the inside and the outside – and they will never shut me up.

Having lost my voice and regained it, I will never under-estimate its power. When I get to the end of my law degree, I hope and expect this voice will be strengthened even more. I am expecting that an intimate knowledge of the law, plus an intimate knowledge of the

inside of a prison cell, will provide me with some unique insights. I won't step away from that. I will fight to be able to represent women and to be able to use that unique perspective to give them at least a level playing field for the battle.

I would like to think you would support me in this. I would like to think you would all take to heart the words of Martin Luther King, which appear on the PLS website for you to see every time you open it up:

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere”.

Today, especially, I would urge you all not just to find a strident voice to echo King's, but to lead the way for others to do the same.

Today is **prison justice day**. This day began in Canada in 1975 to remember men and women who have died from unnatural causes inside prisons. In Queensland, as you would all be too aware, we have had our share of these tragedies. Prisoner deaths from murder, suicide and neglect can and must be prevented. Injustice must be exposed, wherever it is.

These things are possible. But to make them possible, you need a **voice**, and you need **leaders**.

All of you in front of me have those qualities. You have them in abundance.

I'd be delighted – and so would Martin Luther King I reckon - to see what happened if you **really** used them. Together united, to make a stance for a just and fair society for all.

I believe this is 'what is possible'.

Thank you