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Elaine Parsons Interview

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Bucknell: Occupied

Jennifer Thomson, interviewer (JT)
Elaine Parsons, interviewee (EP)

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JT: So. Again Eileen Parsons is joining us on the phone from Pittsburgh. Elaine is a historian at Duquesne University. Her most recent book is entitled Ku Klux: the Birth of the Klan in the Reconstruction era in United States. But Parsons is really here to talk to us about her work with the Elsinore-Bennu Think Tank for Restorative Justice at the State Correctional Institute in Pittsburgh. So again welcome to the studio for the second time Elaine.

EP: Glad to be here.

JT: Thanks for joining us. And I'd like to start our conversation by asking you to talk a little bit about the facility that you work. Just give us a sense. You know especially since most of us don't know what State Correctional Institute is like.

EP: Yeah, so actually Pittsburgh is is a minimum to medium security prison it's right outside of Pennsylvania it's on the Ohio River. [INAUDIBLE] It's called a wall. One thing that's interesting about it is it was built in 1882. So it's a lot of the buildings there are super old you know old style like you take from the movies.

JT: MmHm.

EP: You know, prison facilities. It used to be a maximum security and then it was at that age it didn't qualify for that anymore and they mothballed it in 2005 reopened in 2007. There's like a thousand five hundred men in the prison. Something like that. And most of them in prison are there it's a program prison.

JT: OK.

EP: So yeah. So there's a lot of different programs. A lot of people who are there are there in substance abuse therapeutic community.

JT: OK

EP: So they're already kinda... that kind of stuff. And... But they have other kinds of programs too. And the group that I work with in there are actually a group of lifers who are also in minimum security to medium security. So that's not... they're a small group within the prison but that's a group that I meet with.

JT: Ok. I mean this is interesting we here we have quite a few prisons in this area. One is USP Lewisburg which is right up the road. It is also a very sort of old facility which they have chosen to maintain as a maximum security facility. But that's of course.

EP: Yes.

JT: on the federal level.

EP: Right.

JT: So for the men that you work with what is life like for them on a daily basis in the facility. It is... it's a facility that is in decline, right? So there's always issues for the temperature, you know things like that. And then I guess another thing about this facility is that it's... A lot of the men who are in there are getting ready to go home. And people will be sent there may be at the end of their sentence.

JT: OK.

EP: Except for the men that I work with, they have a lot of people coming through and, you know, so there's a lot of shifting around of people that they're living with. You know they do have. They move around in the facility a lot, even during the day they're moving into the yard and things like that and there's some access to programs. There's an issue with, well obviously my area's super, super tight and there's problems with having enough resources to run that kind of program they intend to run, and the rooms and things and often there's problems with [INAUDIBLE] and things like that. There's that kind of economic problem that all facilities have.

JT: What are the central concerns that they have? You know from what I understand you spent quite a bit of time talking with them, so...

EP: Yes yeah. So there's several concerns that the men might have had. So their central concern is how can I become free [LAUGHS] one day. And they're for sure, they're all in their life sentences and they understand themselves to not have the possibility of parole but they're hoping as... ideas about society seems to be shifting. And I did incarceration injustice, but people reconsider the wisdom of having... the idea of leaving them in there. So the men who are in my group two of them have been in for... since the 1970s and they're really ready to be out. [LAUGHS] They feel very ready so I have to say that that definitely is the concern that looms larger than life to them. What is their path to be able to go back home.

JT: And what is your specific role. I mean I know that you're with this think tank. Can you talk to us a little bit about what that project is and what you do specifically as part of it?

EP: Sure. Absolutely. Yeah. So I've been going out for two years now about two years as part of this think tank which... the think tank is six men who are... all of whom are lifers. And Norm Conti, who is a sociology professor. And a couple of other people. You know Steve and [INAUDIBLE] and occasionally other people come in less regularly, Steve and me are always there, and we all come together every week for a couple hours and we try to think of different ways that the men in this group and us can help communicate between the prison and the outer world. So we've tried various things. We basically come up with strategies to try to get out our message. And our message is that it's largely a restorative justice message which is the idea that incarceration and imprisonment shouldn't be just about or shouldn't be about punishment. It should be about making people whole, so both the victims and the communities that have been harmed by a crime. But also the people who have committed the crime that the concept of restorative justice is that things will only be fixed when all of those parties are fixed and the only people that can fix those parties are when they come together and work together. So we try to think of

various ways that we can bring the message of restorative justice out to the general population. So we've done things like last year we had an art show. And which went really good, we had a really good turnout for that. Where some of the men in the facility created art and we invite people at the Duquesne University and the broader community to come out and see it. We're writing a book together right now about the experience of incarceration and what that does with identity, and we're basing that book on restorative justice principles. We are running a training session for police where the police chief has agreed to send in some police officers to meet with the think tank and go through a curriculum that they have designed, which is meant to help the police understand the needs of the community that they police. And so we have a whole... and we're producing a film. We're working on producing a film about, about this effort. We have a whole bunch of different irons in the fire.

JT: Yeah, that's really exciting. I think you're like to ask you just talk a little bit more about each of these in turn. So can we actually just start with a training session for police and I'm wondering if you can go into how that was designed and how it will actually work once it's in practice.

EP: Well. So there... I don't know how familiar people are out there you know some people would be familiar with an initiative called Inside Out.

JT: OK.

EP: Inside Out is like a training program for university professors who want to teach in prison. So a lot of incarcerated people come into contact with Inside Out, right? From people coming to teach classes. And they developed a curriculum for these classes and we have modified that curriculum. So that it's appropriate for a class which is going to consist of texts. I believe the first class. It's gonna be a test class and it's going to be the six men in a group and then six officers.

JT: OK.

EP: And so what we'll do is it's going to meet several weeks and each week we're going to go through various kinds of things like that you know meet in small groups and meet as partners and ask each other questions and you know explore different aspects of what we think we do when we're policing.

JT: MmHm.

EP: and how we think that the justice system ought to work. And so it's an effort to sort of bring about communication and mutual understanding. Between the two groups.

JT: How long will this course be?

EP: It looks like it will be a semester long course. And actually my University has at least preliminarily agreed to give credit for that course to both the officers and the incarcerated men.

JT: OK.

EP: So we're very excited about that. So it will be a regular college course but just the people in it will be all officers and men who are incarcerated.

JT: and where are the officers coming from?

EP: They're coming from the Pittsburgh police force. We were fortunate enough that we had the support of the Pittsburgh police administration and they're at least trying this. And the support of the person in trying this out as a pilot, we're interested in seeing how it works. And if everybody is happy with how it works, we're going to tweak and try to make it more widely available.

JT: And to what degree are, you know, the prisoners at that facility from the Pittsburgh area?

EP: Not all the prisoners, not all of the men in our group are from the Pittsburgh area.

JT: MmHm.

EP: But not all the men in prison are from the Pittsburgh area. I don't think I could give you numbers on that, but I know there's a large number of men from Philadelphia out in our prison. Because it's a... because it's a program prison, because it has the therapeutic communities.

JT: MmHm.

EP: We also have a cancer treatment center and a couple of other special needs units. It draws from across the state.

JT: Right. I mean I'm imagining for people listening in this particular area to think about how this might work here. You know there's certainly a huge discrepancy in demographics, right, between central Pennsylvania and Pittsburgh. So I was curious about...

EP: Yeah.

JT: you know the matchup between you know the kind of places that these police officers work in and the experience of the men who will be working with them.

EP: That a fair really, that's a good point. In this particular case for this pilot, it's going to be all Pittsburgh.

JT: MmHm.

EP: Right, because all the men in this group are from Pittsburgh and all of the police officers are Pittsburgh police, however, as we go forward I think that that's actually really important. And I'm glad you brought it up. You know we've been so focused on coming up with this pilot and you know getting authorization for it and we haven't really started to think about Step two yet, but I think you're right that it's hugely important to think about how things get different when you get to the middle of the state

JT: Right.

EP: and also different police cultures between Pittsburgh and Philadelphia as well.

JT: Very much so.

EP: Yeah.

JT: And so you're also working on a book with the inmates?

EP: Yes we are. We are. It is. We're working on a book. We've been writing for, oh gosh, for two years now. The men have been writing contributions. They were just writing because all of the men in this group love to write and they're writers. So they were just writing anyway. But we started collecting those writings to put it together into an edited collection. And we started talking about how we want to construct the single thing and how to make the pieces go together. And the theme we came up with is. What to do with identity and the question we started asking was. What happens to your identity when you go to prison? And and so all of the essays in some way explores some aspect of that and the way that they tend to be. Some of them are about what you use in their old identity when you go to prison and men talking about their own situations a lot of narrative, of personal narrative. But there's also more sort of classical reflection, right, on what happens, you know, what you lose.

JT: MmHm.

EP: And the second group of writings is about what it is they keep. How it is that people have ties to the community and are elements you know remain the same person and works for them in the same person within prison and then a third part which is sort of maybe the most difficult to deal with with the question of what what do people become in prison and like how is it that people can become something and fix and restore something or build something--a community in prison. And I think that's particularly important if you're a person who has a life sentence, one thing that you have to do it is build yourself a place to be, and a person to be that works. And so a lot of the essays are also about becoming. Who you become and who you can become within the prison.

JT: So I, from what I understand, you have several pieces of writing from the men that you brought with you.

EP: I do but it's just a sample. I brought four pieces of writing with me and I don't need to read, I just wasn't sure how much you'd want but I brought some of the little ones that I love the most. There's some really excellent pieces of writing. All of them. And they vary some of them are poems some of them are personal narrative. Some of them are more philosophical reflections. But I brought a collection would you like for me to...

JT: Yes, please. Why don't you choose for us and give us a little bit of context for each piece.

EP: Okay great. Well I will start with... I will start with one... I'm looking through, how can I get to decide where to start. [LAUGHS] I'll start with one by Malachi and this is the poem by Malachi and you have to hear him. You know, when they when they write these they read them aloud to each other and you know within the group. And it's so much better when they read them themselves. So I feel like you know it's too bad that I can't read in the same voice. I will do my best at reading Malachi's poem, which is called "Selling My Soul," so. [00:17:17 - 00:23:19, POETRY READING, RIGHTS UNKNOWN, NOT TRANSCRIBED]

JT: Wow is going to be in part of the book.

EP: Yeah I'm sure it will. We are right now getting ready to decide which of the essays we're going to put in the book. We have about 60 pieces of writing and we're going to sit down and go through them together and figure out we're going to organize them. I can't imagine that's not going to be in there.

JT: Yeah. That's amazing.

EP: It is.

JT: Do you have time to read one more for us?

EP: Yeah, I do. Absolutely. It's so hard to decide which to read, [LAUGHS] they're just all so great. Let's see. I think I will read. Oscar's "I'll Never Swallow This Pill." [00:24:18 - 00:27:09, POETRY READING, RIGHTS UNKNOWN, NOT TRANSCRIBED]

JT: I mean just listening to both of these these pieces it just makes me think how difficult it must be for them to work on a project about changing the criminal justice system. When they know that nothing might ever change for them.

EP: No I think that's right. But I also think one thing that all of us have is a great deal of hope.

JT: MmHm.

EP: I think that it will change and it may change. So I think, I think that that's really that's the one thing that will help you go forward is hope that we will be able to move past this, and I think there's reason to think that society is changing now and people are really listening to how messed up the criminal justice system is.

JT: Yeah.

EP: So I think and I believe that that's what drives us what makes it possible for us to do that is that I think that none of the men believe that they will never get out.

JT: Right.

EP: I believe that all of them believe that they will get out. And I believe that too.

JT: And you know when you have these conversations about restorative justice, I mean, what would that look like as a system under which we operate as a society, right? I mean I think, particularly in the United States, and particularly over the last 40-50 years this country has been so mired in a very law and order punitive kind of criminal justice system that it's hard to imagine an alternative as anything but, you know, bleeding heart liberalism, right?

EP: Right.

JT: So can you can you can you give us a sense of what this might actually look like as a viable alternative.

EP: Yeah. Yeah, and well, other people have been putting a lot of a lot of time into this question of restorative justice

JT: Right

EP: In the prisons and the schools, and there's a whole bunch of different ways that you can think about restorative justice. I'm sure you could think about tons of international relations too. But I think that... what it looks like for a prison. Is that as we... having prisons be about getting together and having a conversation much more of a connection between the people within the prison and the people outside the prison. I try to say you know I try to think of and to talk about people in Pittsburgh as our neighbors,

JT: MmHm.

EP: the people who are in our community, even though our prisons were built to keep people out of the community. And so I think the idea of restorative justice is that you can't remove people from the community and that the only way that anything can be fixed is if everybody on the outside stays in conversations with people on the inside or listens to what happened, what caused the... the crisis or what caused the violence to occur, and work together to allow the people who have committed the crimes to do what they can to fix the wrongs that they have done and if they can't fix it, to try to do their best to make the communities whole. And then have the communities themselves reach back toward these men and women who have offended and been in prison with the goal of bringing them back into the community and healing the community that way. And so the idea of restorative justice is that as long as we're separated by a wall... things can't be fixed. And that our goal is integration.

JT: Right, so I mean in this model then, does the prison and the judicial system as we know it today continue to play a role even though it might be a temporary role, or is the emphasis on...

[CROSSTALK]

EP: And that's the really interesting question, right? And it's sort of visionary to imagine there might be something completely disparate. I think I can speak for the men in my group who all think "Oh I should never have been arrested. That there should not have been..."

JT: MmHm.

EP: "imprisonment" right? But they think that the goal of imprisonment should be reintegration...

JT: Right.

EP: and healing, right? Rather than punishment and... Shunning.

JT: Which seems to be the central motivation of our pretty much our entire criminal justice system seems to be on delivering the maximum punishment possible and figuring out ways to actually increase that.

EP: Yeah. Yeah. And I think that's it's getting a lot of traction in the schools right now as a way of dealing with...

JT: MmHm. MmHm.

EP: kids who are having problems with behavior in school. It's not about shunning them or sending them out of the classroom, it's about trying to fix problems. So I'm hoping and I think a lot of people are hoping that this is the direction that the criminal justice system goes in.

JT: That would be wonderful. And I know a former colleague of ours has actually started a restorative justice system in Ferguson.

EP: Really?

JT: Yeah, centered around trying to work towards a different relationship between the community and the police there. So I know that you're working with limited time, but I wonder if you actually have time to read us one more piece?

EP: I can read one more piece, yeah...

JT: OK.

EP: Yeah... let me grab this piece here by Calisa [?], and it's called "Losses" and it's about the moment that he went to, he was [INAUDIBLE] a life sentence.

JT: OK.

EP: "Losses" [00:33:32 - 00:37:13, POETRY READING, RIGHTS UNKNOWN, NOT TRANSCRIBED]

JT: Wow. Thank you for reading those.

EP: Well thank you for having me, it was a real pleasure to talk.

JT: Maybe we can check in sometime in the fall when you're projects are at a different point and we can...

EP: Love to, love to do that, I've got plenty more excellent ones.

JT: All right, well thank you for giving us a call here, Elaine.

EP: Yeah, it was a pleasure. Goodbye.

JT: Goodbye, take care.

[ENDED 00:38:34, CUT SOUND AND MUSIC AT 00:37:47]