

SANTA CRUZ WOMEN'S PRISON PROJECT

Progress Report - October 1973

The goal of the Santa Cruz Women's Prison Project is to contribute to the rehabilitation of communities and to the abolition of prisons. Working toward this goal, people from the Santa Cruz and greater Bay Area communities have become involved with prisoners of the California Institution for Women, the nation's largest prison for women. The main focus of the project is to conduct workshops within the prison on issues immediately relevant to raising the social and political consciousness of ourselves and the women prisoners.

Our project began in April 1972 when Karlene Faith gained access to the prison to conduct graduate research for her dissertation on women in prison. The focus of her research is to examine female roles and stereotypes as they have been defined by the dominant American culture and as they have affected the lives and educational experiences of incarcerated women. As a result of Karlene's involvement in the prison, she received permission to teach a course in August 1972 to CIW prisoners on the subject of women in American society. She was joined in presenting this course by a fellow graduate student, Jeanne Gallick.

Fifty women participated in this course, which was divided into two separate classes. For their work the women received the first college credit to be granted to prisoners in the history of the institution. The credit was granted through the University of California Extension and the experience of earning college credit, and discovering themselves to be capable of serious college work, was a tremendously exciting experience for the course participants. The classes awakened the women to a serious consideration of the problems faced by women in this society. It provided a forum for dialogue about social problems, especially those related to poverty and racial divisions. The classes stimulated an analysis of prisons and the functions served by prisons in perpetuating a class structure. Through their work in the classes, women began discovering their personal talents and they gained new confidence in their abilities as students and as women. Finally, the women began to articulate their serious frustrations from having been denied educational opportunities both prior to and during their periods of incarceration. The collective response to the course was one of self-awakening and hope, and determination that we develop an on-going higher education program within the prison that could facilitate

the continued development of their personal, intellectual, vocational and political goals. The women speak for themselves:

You have allowed us to grow and expand through this class and that was a real compliment to us. We don't usually grow in here. We die in here. This has been fantastic.

The class has been one of the most meaningful experiences I've ever had. I learned a lot of respect for myself as a woman, as your teachings showed me I have a right to be proud of myself. The writing assignments made me sit down and take a really good look at myself as a person and as a woman and, hey! I learned to like myself.

All the reading and writing taught me things I hadn't known before--about the world and about myself. It gave me hope.

Through this class I have seen something happen. It's been a happening. It's been heavy. I've done so much time and I've never seen a group of convicts hang in with each other in so much unity. It's been beautiful. It's been a spiritual experience really. You walk past people every day in the institution and you don't know the} 've got all this in their head or in their heart, and we came together in this classroom and there it all was.

Clearly there was a need for the women to come together in a safe place where they could learn together and begin to discover their own power and the power of their sisters, both inside and outside the prison. So Karlene and Jeanne returned to Santa Cruz and arranged for interim support from UC Extension to administer university credit for a continuing program. They recruited 35 people from Santa Cruz (many of them fellow graduate students in the UC History of Consciousness program) and from the San Francisco Bay Area. With these volunteer instructors, they set up a series of weekend workshops on a variety of topics which matched the interests of the women at CIW. Twice a month for the past year a carload of workshop instructors have driven 500 miles to the prison to lead intensive seminars on such topics as: Black Studies, Women and Economics, the Chicana Experience, Radical Psychology, Music, Dance, Drama, Journalism, Film, Social Theory, Women and the Law, and other interesting and vital topic areas. Every woman in the prison has been free to join in these workshops, regardless of her educational background. Special workshops have been held in the psychiatric treatment unit and in the maximum security section.

The learning process through these weekend workshops has been in every way reciprocal. We are coming together as common members of a mutual endeavor, which means that we have grown increasingly de-mystified about one another. The fears

that some of us have had about the "criminal element" (however urgently our politics have commanded us to suppress, i.e. be ashamed of, those fears) have been dissolved. The fears that many prisoners have had about being able to succeed in an academic community are similarly dissolving. The women who have participated in the program have been superior students--superior academically and superior in their commitment to the learning process and the implications that arise from the acquisition of authentic and meaningful knowledge.

As of this writing, 105 women at CIW have participated actively in the workshop program. Of these, 52 women have received academic credit for their work. Many more women (estimate upward to 100) have attended social events which we have organized. These parties, including a weekend music marathon, have been valuable in bringing people together in a relaxed climate of music and food and friendship; several important new bonds have been formed in these encounters. We estimate that at least 1/3 of the prison population is now involved either seriously or marginally with the people and activities of the Santa Cruz Women's Prison Project. The responsibility this implies is awesome to us; it also generates a confirmed commitment to our work there.

We have expanded our current program for 1973-74. Over 100 people, including coordinators, instructors and entertainers, are scheduled to go to CIW during the coming year. It is institutionally required that "qualified instructors" lead each workshop; however, we are recruiting women who are inside to work with us as assistants and, in some cases, to lead their own workshops. Women on the inside have also assumed a significant share of the work in publicity and arrangements inside. The key organizational responsibility for the 1973-74 project will be assumed by Project Coordinators, Jeanne Gallick and Catherine Angell, together with Project Consultant, Karlene Faith. We will be offering over 100 workshops this year, under the umbrella of eight college-credit courses: Women and the Law; On Being a Woman; Drug Use and Abuse; Creative Arts; Radical Psychology; Ethnic Studies; Capitalism and U.S. Institutions; and Creative Writing (in preparation for an anthology of writings from women in prison. (See our pamphlet for detailed description of these courses.)

Although our college credit workshop program remains the central focus of the project, we have also formed ties with self-help prisoner organizations inside CIW. We consider these contacts critically important to our long-range goal at CIW of encouraging the women to demand that their outside communities respond

to their needs. Members of the Long-Termers Organization asked the History of Consciousness graduate program\* to assume official sponsorship of their group; this sponsorship has now been authorized by the prison authorities. The Long-Termers Organization has been floundering for over a year in failed attempts to function effectively inside the prison, due to lack of official sponsorship. The goals of the organization are educational opportunities for long-termers (seven years to life sentences) and legal defense support. To meet the specific educational desires of people confined for an indefinite period, we have worked with long-termers in planning our 1973-74 college program at CIW. We have also contacted a group of law students in southern California who have agreed to come to CIW as companion sponsors of the Long-Termers Organization. They will focus on legal investigation, instructing long-termers in legal rights and processing and assisting them with legal appeals.

Since the inception of our project we have viewed an educational furlough program as an essential step toward the phasing out of the prison and the implementation of alternative community programs. With a view toward this goal, two women at CIW have written a superb proposal for education furlough which would allow them to leave the prison daily to attend classes fulltime at Chaffey College. They have carefully researched every aspect of such a potential program and have gained the support of several staff persons at the prison. Still they face many serious obstacles, and we intend to support them in this pilot effort by seeking legal counsel and demonstrating that there is legal precedent for such a program, namely, educational furlough is allowed in some men's prisons. Related to the educational furlough proposal is our desire to influence Chaffey College (the local community college), neighboring state universities, and UC Riverside in becoming seriously involved in meeting the educational needs of women at CIW. At least partly as a result of our influence, Chaffey College has already begun to offer a few small classes at CIW. We intend to hold meetings with representatives of all these neighboring schools during the coming year in the hope of arousing their responsibility to their neglected prison constituency. It is our hope that ultimately we can all work effectively with one another.

Last year in one of our Black Studies workshops, the idea came up that the Self-Help Afro-American Cultural Organization at CIW (SHAACO) might put together a three-day Black Culture Marathon. This marathon, organized around the theme of unity through knowledge, took place in September. We were asked

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\*Students from the History of Consciousness Graduate Program (University of California at Santa Cruz) comprise a major share of the human energy in the prison project, and the program remains an official sponsor of our work.

to help by bringing down discussion leaders and entertainers from black communities in Santa Cruz and the Bay Area. The weekend was a profound success and it was an extremely important step in demonstrating the power of the black women in the prison to call upon their local communities to respond to the needs of black women in prison.

A goal of the program that has been achieved in significant ways has been the drawing together of women of various ethnic backgrounds. One of the most striking negative aspects of prison, communities is that the racial conflicts and antagonisms that are common in the dominant society become dramatically exploited within the confines of the prison. Through our college program, Black, Chicana, Asian, and Native American women have joined together with Caucasian women to understand and actively confront their individual and collective problems, successes and aspirations for a freer life both inside and outside the prison. Questions related to racial prejudice and conflict, and the economic-social-political causes and consequences of these, are frequent topics of discussion within the integrated workshops; much progress has been made among the women in the workshops toward closer multi-racial communication and understanding.

We are involved in the Special Security Unit (maximum closed custody) and have been able to bring many outsiders into this unit to meet and talk with the five women imprisoned there. Several close friendships have formed from these meetings. We succeeded in bringing films to the unit and have experienced only erratic censorship of materials. An important break in the isolation of these women from the rest of the prison population was made when our program was able to facilitate a meeting between the main prison's Long-Termers Organization and the women in the maximum security unit-. These two groups have long been attempting to come together to discuss their common problems as potentially-permanent inmates of the prison. Their meeting was a high for all of us. We are now helping the Long-Termers arrange for such meetings to occur regularly.

An extremely disturbing new development at CIW is the opening of a management unit called the Intensive Program Unit. Women who are especially troublesome to the authorities and women who can't face the reality of the prison have been put on closed custody in this unit. All rights are taken from them in an attempt to re-program them through behavior modification techniques until they are able to fit the expectations of the authorities. We were able to convince the administration that the women locked in this unit would benefit

from our college program. We are now offering workshops in radical psychology, drugs, American politics, and women's studies to the 50 women confined in this unit. We are giving all the support we can to these women to develop their understanding and their resistance to the breaking down of their character and spirit.

Our work inside the prison has been complemented by an increasing energy output in our work outside. We have been able to draw on the interest and talent of increasing numbers of people from Santa Cruz and the San Francisco Bay Area, both in promoting our work at CIW and in making it as good as we can. In addition to involving people directly in our work, we have actively begun an educational program to instruct people in the "free" world on the nature and conditions of the prison system. During the past year Karlene has done several radio interviews and this year will be devoting a major share of her time to writing a book about CIW and our work there. We are involved with several media projects which give us access to potential audiences in the Monterey and San Francisco Bay Areas. All of us are speaking and submitting articles at every opportunity. (The current issue of Women: A Journal of Liberation contains an article/interview which Susan Atkins did with Karlene at CIW last summer.) We're also finding opportunities for parolees to speak and write about their prison experience. Some of the parolees are locating publication possibilities for their work; others are encouraging our work by speaking at benefit fund-raising events.

We're scheduling once-a-month CIW reunion parties for parolees in the area and their friends. We're hoping to increase contact between parolees and give them a chance to work through some of their problems on the outside with one another and with people who may have helpful resources for them. Our alliances with Connections of San Francisco and Sisterhood of San Diego will be firmed during the year when we'll all meet to discuss our particular and common goals and find ways to avoid duplicating each other's efforts and to facilitate one another's work at CIW. At the moment, the Santa Cruz Women's Prison Project has the most access to CIW due to the sheer volume and broad range of our work there. But as we learned during our shut-out last year, this could change at any moment. The support we received at that time from Connections was extremely critical in our gaining re-entry to the prison. Thus it's important for all of us to have access to one another's channels. We plan to hold our alliance meeting with Connections and Sisterhood in the Los Angeles

area in the hope of assisting interested people from Los Angeles in forming a CIW-support group in that city. Given the close proximity of L.A. to CIW it is necessary that a prisoner-support chapter be formed in that city, and we seriously hope to facilitate that development.

We do, of course, have problems. The prison staff and, to a lesser degree, the administration, would probably be relieved to see our program fold They are in a double bind situation. The prison administration benefits from ur program in that they can point to it as a striking example of an innovative educational program within the penal system. Also, we make their work easier insofar as people who have good head spaces are better able to find constructive channels for their angers. Such good head spaces come to all of us through our contact with one another at CIW as we share and clarify our world views and have a good time with music, food and mellow vibes. A woman who prior to our program might have thrust her undefined frustrations onto the prison staff and other prisoners may now throw her, energies into her studies, new friendships and meaningful goals for herself and her peers. This may mean that our program provides the space for women prisoners to turn their angers back more constructively onto the prison itself, rather than onto themselves or their peers. We requested that each woman in our program write an evaluation of our work at CIW and one of the most frequently stated comments related to the effect our program has had on bringing the prisoners into closer contact with one another--how they were experiencing real sisterhood with each other in place of the isolation and alienation that the prison structure normally encourages.

We can assume, in any case, that the prison authorities and staff will probably never be able to reconcile themselves to our presence in the prison, which they jealously guard as their turf. They recognize that we represent an opposing value system and life-style; they know from observation and direct conversations with us that our philosophy and methods are antithetical to the punishment-as-treatment philosophy of the penal system. So they do what they can, especially the lower echelon staff personnel, to obstruct our movement within the prison. We have had to struggle through many painful processes with this problem. Both in terms of analysis (they are not our enemy) and in terms of how to practically communicate with them so as to encourage their facilitation of our work (e.g. opening doors through which we have the right/need to walk) and still stand firm on our principles (e.g. not sitting still while they seriously abuse and humiliate a prisoner within our presence.)

Another problem, which we still haven't thought enough about, is that of creating illusions. We are at our human best when we go to the prison and we bring with us an incredible array that is novel and very much desired by prisoners: human contact; reports from the outside; bold ideas; analysis of the world we all live in; a situation of reciprocal respect; an abundance of excellent books and films; musicians/rock bands; food that is mind-blowing to someone who for months has been deprived of fruit, cheese, nuts and other healthy, tasty treats; an intimacy and a camaraderie that is rare in any situation and unheeded in prison routine. We bring ourselves, and on the face of it we would all seem to be getting along pretty well in the world without being co-opted by it. All of this can, and in some instances most definitely has, set up expectations for a woman's post-release plans. She envisions that life outside, if she can just be involved with the right people, will be an unending set of such beautiful circumstances. And of course it just can't happen. She's beset with enormous problems--economic, emotional and political problems. She can't find a job or a place to live, she has to hassle with welfare people to find or regain her children, she feels lonely and overwhelmed and confused. And we can't provide her (when there are so many of her) with all the practical and emotional support which we want to give her and which she often desperately needs. Our monthly reunion parties are a modest attempt to begin dealing with this problem--bringing parolees with common problems and strengths in touch with one another, as well as with ourselves. Certainly in some ultimate way we share the same problems--all of us. But there are real class discrepancies between a woman just released from prison with no certifiable job skills and a person who has never been caught in the clutches of the law and who is working on a Ph.D. The difficulties facing a woman upon her release from prison are extreme in the extreme, and too often the consequences are a return ticket to the prison. In fact, one of the shocking realizations we come to through our work is that some women would rather return to the prison than to have to face the daily frustrations and humiliations of parole. We know that there will be women who participate in our program who will receive parole violations or new cases and that they will return to the prison. We know that every woman released on parole will have to struggle through horribly unfair and seemingly irresolvable problems. And this is something we have to learn to deal with, while simultaneously keeping up our vital work in the prison.

The question of follow-up is important not just for the potential support which we could give to women on parole, but also for our own need to evaluate our work at CIW. If we are to become truly successful, no woman released on parole from CIW will ever return to the prison. A woman would be able to leave the prison with realistic plans for herself and the preparation and resources to achieve them. She would have no illusions but she would have the strength, understanding and contacts to overcome the problems which the system determinedly sets before her. (The Department of Corrections, we are told, projects a CIW population of 1700 for 1975--triple the present population. '...he:/' have their reasons for needing prisoners--prison industry and unemployment among them. And parolees will be, as always, the first source they will tap for their prison expansion program.)

We have mentioned the hassles by the prison authorities and the challenge of follow-up. We are thirdly troubled by the problem that is universal among people who are trying to do good collective work--there isn't any money. If it weren't for the political economy, we wouldn't have our existing prison system much less the need for volunteer prison projects. But given the existing reality, lack of funds is the thorn in our side. During our first year as a project we received about \$2500 (one tenth of our need) from graduate student donations, benefits, and a grant of \$1,000 from the Vanguard Foundation. We have and will continue to donate our own meager resources and to plan benefit concerts insofar as our time and energy can allow for that. We especially want to appeal to musicians to donate part of their performance receipts to our project. Benefits are great because they do a lot to educate the community about prisons and our work at CIW. The music brings us together in the spirit as well as in the service of the people.

The university\* is attempting to locate substantive foundation support for our 1973-74 program but so far nothing is forthcoming. We're proceeding with the blind faith that somehow we'll find an individual, group or foundation to support us. There is a detailed fund proposal available upon request from the project coordinators. Please contribute if you can--in any amount. It always comes to that.

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\*Sue Liddicoat of the University Relations office and Jerry Neu, Chairperson of the History of Consciousness program, deserve very special regard for their efforts to locate foundation support for our work.

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Women's Education Center, Inc.

AND

all the many volunteers, friends  
and supporters of the

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