

GRATERFRIENDS

November/December 2025 Issue

A Positive Vision

George Rahsaan Brooks of SCI Coal Township

To all prisoners serving prison sentences who have lost their hope or faith, it's essential for you

to renew your commitment to the challenges that confront you and continue to strive for positive change. I could lie and claim that I made it out of 2024 undaunted, that I never lost hope or faith and that I stayed on course the whole year—but that would not be truthful. If it was,

I would truly be the only person on this planet who didn't face disappointments, stress, and trauma, and who did not suffer some. Being a member of the Judicial and Legislative Committees of Lifeline, being my own attorney in four pending criminal and civil litigations, and being a jailhouse lawyer and human rights advocate, I am constantly being challenged in new ways—ways that sometimes make me want to abandon some of my fights. However, I continue to fight and so should you!

I don't have to preach to you that sometimes life can be cruel and painful, but neither should I have to tell you that painful experiences can be blessings if we use them as beacons of light to show us where

we must grow and how we can get our lives in clearer focus. Without feelings of hurt, discouragement, and discontent, we would never feel challenged to correct manifest injustices and fundamental wrongs, to make changes in our lives and to hold a positive vision of what we want for ourselves, our families, and our tomorrows.

One of the most powerful things we can do is hold a positive vision for what we desire for ourselves, our families, and our communities while simultaneously putting muscle behind our vision to make it our reality. I bear witness that it's not easy to keep a positive vision where there is a lot of outside noise polluted with negativity. However, without positive faith our minds become confounded and consumed by hopelessness, indifference, and fear. If we fail to keep a positive vision, we will focus on problems and experiences we don't need instead of guiding our minds to find solutions, then turning those solutions into our realities. Our mind is a wondrous tool. It has the power to plant seeds. It has god powers. One of the greatest truths in life is that we have the opportunity to experience what we envision.

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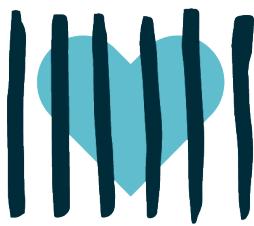
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Prison Society's David Meade interviews Sydia Bagley on her experience in federal prison, life outside of prison and how her work has empowered youth in her community.

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An Overview of the PENNSYLVANIA PRISON SOCIETY

Who We Are

Founded in 1787, The Pennsylvania Prison Society is the nation's oldest human rights organization. Our mission for 235 years has been to promote the health, safety, and dignity of people impacted by mass incarceration. In 1828, the Prison Society was granted access to all people in state or county custody in PA – we remain the only non-governmental organization in the United States with our level of statutory access to people in prison. Although some of our specific programs have evolved over time, we remain committed to responding to the needs of incarcerated people and their loved ones. Today, we use that access to monitor prison conditions, assist people in prison with individual issues they raise, build connections to family and community, and educate the public about the largely hidden world of prisons.

How do I contact the Prison Society?

You may write to us at 230 South Broad Street, Suite 605 Philadelphia, PA 19102. You can also have your loved ones call our family support helpline at anytime: 215-564-4775. Our team can assist to answer questions about specific facilities, policies, general issues, and concerns. Our team is small and we are not able to provide legal assistance, but we will do our best to help you get the information and resources you need. Unfortunately, at this time as an organization we are generally not able to use ConnectNetwork to correspond with people confined in SCIs.

What is Prison Monitoring?

The Prison Society is the only non-governmental organization in the country with a legal right to meet privately with any person incarcerated in their state. Each month, we receive hundreds of reports concerning access to healthcare, abuse, property, conditions of confinement, treatment, and other issues. Our trained volunteer Prison Monitors can meet with anyone incarcerated in Pennsylvania state or county prison to hear their concern in detail and engage in follow-up advocacy.

Out of respect for one's privacy and safety, we will never send a Prison Monitor without an explicit request for a visit from an incarcerated person or their loved one. During a visit, a prison monitor will meet with the person in custody one-on-one to discuss and document their situation. Following the visit, volunteers are empowered to speak with prison administration on their behalf to try to improve the situation. It is important to note that we are not lawyers and cannot assist with legal issues or casework.

What about re-entry services?

For individuals returning to the Philadelphia area, The Prison Society does have a mentoring program available designed to help ease the transition from incarceration back to communities by providing a strong social support network. We hope to expand this to other regions in the state in the future.

What happens when I share what's going on in prison?

We are grateful to the countless people in custody and their families who help promote prison transparency across the Commonwealth. Beyond working to address concerns on an individual and/or facility level, the information you provide drives our vital conversations with Pennsylvania legislators, allied organizations, and the public. As we work to educate others and engage in systemic advocacy, it is vital that this is led by the experiences and opinions of the people closest to the problem- you! Your voices directly informed our current advocacy to end the \$5 medical copay for incarcerated people, as well as our work to remove barriers to family visits.

What happens when I write to you?

We will always do our best to assist you. You can write to us to request resources, report conditions at a state or local facility, or request a prison monitor. The Prison Society is not a legal organization and can not provide specific legal advice or representation. However, our correspondence volunteers thoroughly respond to each and every letter we receive with information about other resources and organizations. We can also help you navigate different issues related to education, free books and other creative programs, reentry services, mental health resources, pen pal programs, and more.



About GRATERFRIENDS

Launched in 1981 by Joan Gauker and adopted by the Prison Society in 2002, Graterfriends is a critical outlet for incarcerated people to share their opinions and experiences. We are proud to have built a powerful community with you over these past two decades and encourage you to continue submitting to Graterfriends.

We reserve the right to edit submissions. Original submissions will not be returned. Allegations of misconduct must be documented and statistics should be supported by sources. All submissions should be no more than 500 words, or two double-spaced pages. Letters more than 200 words, or one double-spaced page, will not be published in their entirety and may be shortened for clarity and space. To protect Graterfriends from copyright infringement, please attach a note, on your submission, stating that you are the original author of the work and that you give us permission to edit and print; date and sign the declaration.

GRATERFRIENDS

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From the Mail Room

Graterfriends accepts submissions regarding prison legislation, life, and creative endeavors. We do not accept submissions that are offensive in nature and target specific individuals. All letters must be signed for consideration. Names will be withheld from letters on rare occasions. While Graterfriends seeks to preserve the integrity of your work, we reserve the right to edit submissions as we see fit. Allegations of abuse or misconduct may be censored or omitted for your protection and safety.

CPS Workers

Norman Carder of SCI Forest

My name is Norm Carder, BD-0646. I am going on 68 years old and have been in prison for 37 years. I've been in four separate prisons so far. I have strived to do good all of these years. I recently read about an inmate from SCI Muncy who had her CPS worker job taken away from her because the PA DOC recently revised their risk assessment test, called the PRAT, and took away jobs statewide from many deserving inmates who had held these jobs for years. I was a CPS worker for approximately 13 years.

At first, I did not want to be a CPS worker but was convinced by various staff and inmates alike who felt that I'd be good at it. So, I tested to become a CPS Worker and scored 97%. It came naturally to me because I had been helping inmates for years, long before the PA DOC created the position coined "CPS Worker." As a CPS worker, I worked in the RHU for over 4 years where I was disrespected many times. Nonetheless, I was there for the men through all their abusiveness. I was also the CPS worker for the BMU, another abusive place to work. Over the years, I would run into inmates in the general population who were released from the RHU or BMU while I was a CPS worker there. Some of them were the very ones who would call me names. Many then thanked me for taking on the thankless job of being a CPS worker.

I learned a lot not only about my inmate peers but also about myself. Like the female inmate at SCI Muncy who lost her CPS job, I too filled out the DOC's annual form that is required of CPS workers and answered the same questions that she had. I too subsequently had my CPS Worker job pulled from me for the answers that I gave: the same answers I had given year after year for over a decade. When I asked why, I was told the DOC revised their risk assessment

on their annual PRAT test.

I have tried to be of help to my fellow prisoners during my 13 years as a CPS worker. I attended weekly CPS worker meetings at SCI Forest with my excellent instructor. I now feel betrayed by the PA DOC. I thought that they would encourage positive support! I'm more hurt than angry. I'm left with nothing to do but work as a block worker cleaning showers at the lowest pay rate. I've been told by our Deputies and Employment that I cannot get the highest pay for the job that I'm presently doing because I was not rotated out of my previous job. CPS workers are not rotated because they are state certified to perform that job. Since I fall under that category, I'm considered a new hire at minimum pay.

I feel that the central office is in error for revising their standards of testing for CPS workers, especially after so many like myself have worked hard for many years helping troubled inmates. They knew that when they made us CPS workers we were not boy scouts or girl scouts but non-problematic inmates with much to share. Why change that formula now? Hopefully our Secretary of Corrections will reconsider this. By changing their test standards and removing certain CPS Workers, they're losing good, caring, qualified people.

Thankfully, I still have strong family support who will try to help to support me financially. I hope that the Central Office will reconsider their action which, in my opinion, is detrimental to the CPS program. I will continue to help fellow prisoners who seek me out. I will not stop trying to do good for those who trust me enough to confide in me.

E-Cigarette Issues

James R. Cruz of SCI Fayette

This article responds to “E-Cigs are the New Crack” by Darrell Ameen McKelvie from the January/February issue of Graterfriends.

This problem, I am sure, is state-wide in all DOC facilities, and the DOC does not care because they are profiting greatly from inmates purchasing e-cigs. I wrote to Tammy Ferguson, Executive Deputy Secretary of Institutional Operations, about the Daily Air Quality Index (AQI) during outdoor activity because the law says that we are not allowed to go out on bad air quality days, yet they could care less about us messing up our health with e-cigs. I am a lifelong non-smoker and a bit of a “smokaphobe.” When the air is bad, we are not allowed outside in the yard, but, at the same time, the big wigs for the DOC could care less if an inmate sucks down an e-cig, which is far worse for their health than breathing in bad air.

Meanwhile, inmates who do not smoke get their lungs screwed up by having to breathe in the secondhand e-cig smoke from inmates. We also deal with real tobacco smoke from staff who smoke on the bridge either during the day or afterwards. While we are all locked in, the staff smoke like chimneys and that smoke gets circulated through our ventilation system. If we complain, then we have to prove it. But most higher-up staff also smoke and overlook the other staff that smoke indoors, whether it be an e-cig, vape or real tobacco.

All employees are also supposed to only bring in approved-style disposable electronic cigarettes and discard their e-cigs off premises, yet they do not follow this rule. The same goes for chew. They bring in real chew and not the approved chew that is allowed in the institutions. So, maybe more non-smokers need to start complaining and maybe, just maybe, they will get rid of all tobacco products in the DOC and also not allow tobacco products on state reservations. Your call fellas.

Be Moderate with the Tube

Michael Graves of SCI Huntingdon

“The television has become the greatest babysitter in the world of corrections.”

This notion rings true throughout prisons in Pennsylvania, highlighting the inordinate amount of time that prisoners spend watching television. Here at SCI-Huntingdon, watching television is the preferred way that many incarcerated people, like those throughout the state, choose to spend their time. It offers an escape from tedium, boredom, and reality.

Is watching TV bad? Absolutely not. It is the amount of time spent watching TV that is problematic. It is a matter of priorities: when things of far more importance are neglected because of the distraction that TV causes. If we are glued to the TV, productivity (which should be our top priority) diminishes.

I often hear men here speak of very lofty and grandiose plans and aspirations (which is not bad). Yet those same individuals will spend ten hours a day watching TV. That is more than a full-time job. Think about how much can be done to achieve our goals (assuming we have them), if we dedicate half of that time to achieving meaningful, productive ends.

I work as a Teacher’s Aid at SCI-Huntingdon. I assist students in earning their high school diplomas or GEDs. I witnessed a recent GED recipient bask in satisfaction after years of hard work. He worked hard daily, having successes and failures. However, he persevered and his work paid off. He prioritized his studies and mastered the coursework. Success was the final outcome. I was proud of him and overcome with emotion knowing that I participated in his academic development.

Muhammad Ali said, “Don’t count days; make days count.” I encourage everyone who is incarcerated to cut back on the TV if it impedes your progress or distracts you from reaching your goals. In fact, anything that is a distraction should be scaled back or jettisoned altogether. Watch TV, but remember to do so in moderation. Put your goals and the actions required to meet them first. Be inexorable and don’t compromise your goals and your efforts to reach them. Be moderate with the tube!

“Even in prison your time is your own, if you use it for your own purposes,” Robert Greene.

Is the Debt Truly Ever Paid?

John Gordon of SCI Phoenix

In the Commonwealth of Virginia, persons convicted of felonies must individually apply for restoration of voting rights, and their applications must be signed by the governor. In 2017, the Virginia Senate nearly passed an amendment that would permanently deny voting rights to persons convicted of violent felonies, even after release from incarceration.

We, as a country, cannot continue to impose these disenfranchising laws on such a large percentage of our population. There is a phrase commonly used and heard in the American judicial and penal systems: that an offender must “pay their debt to society.” But in a society that tends to permanently punish those labeled “criminals” for the rest of their lives, demoting them to a second-class that strips them of so many rights, I ask: can the debt truly ever be paid?

The United States is supposed to be built upon a foundation of democracy. Democracy, in part, is defined as “a government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly through a system of representation usually involving periodically held free elections” (Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, Eleventh Edition, pg. 331). In 1787 in Philadelphia, the representatives of the Thirteen Colonies who signed the Constitution asserted that the ultimate power of a nation resided in its people, instead of its rulers. But even though Thomas Jefferson stated that “all men are created equal” in the preceding 1776 Declaration of Independence, the Constitution shows that the equity of man’s creation can dissolve due to one’s life circumstances, as it clearly outlines the difference between the “wholeness” of a free person and “all other Persons.” I.e., slaves being defined as only three-fifths of a man. So, those now famous three opening words of the Constitution, “We the People,” were obviously not intended to represent everyone in the United States, especially not the poor nor enslaved. As James Madison put it, the country needed the Constitution “to protect the minority of the opulent against the majority.” (Gerald Fresia, *Toward an American Revolution: Exposing the Constitution and Other Illusions* [1998], pg. 55).

The Civil War’s end emancipated those enslaved, and federal civil rights legislation protecting those newly freed was established—including the Fifteenth

Amendment, introduced in 1870, which states that “the right of the citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.” Despite that, we currently see the shift from the enslaved to a new and large demographic of this country’s population being denied the privileges of citizenship: the incarcerated. More specifically, ex-felons and ex-offenders on varying degrees of post-conviction release, e.g. those who are on probation, parole, or have outright completed their sentence.

In “Sonets,” the Spanish poet and dramatist Luperico Leonardo de Argensola wrote, “No pain equals that of an injury inflicted under the pretense of a just punishment.” Whether incarcerated or thereafter, I fail to see why a citizen of this country should be disallowed to vote. The rule of thumb in law is: the punishment (and any lingering effects thereof) should fit the crime. Why do offenders and/or ex-offenders have to suffer collateral consequences which, among other things, deem them unfit to vote, banishing them to a lifetime of shame, contempt, scorn, and exclusion, clarifying that “they” are no longer a part of “us”?

In conclusion: there needs to be unambiguous national standards regarding prisoner and ex-offender voting policy. What differentiates an offender or ex-offender in Virginia from one in Pennsylvania? I am only aware of two states, Maine and Vermont, that allow prisoners to vote. Most states do not allow parolees to vote, and even after the term of sentencing ends, some states still deny the ability to vote for a certain number of years, or even for the rest of one’s life. This disempowerment runs contrary to the idea of “second chances.” If one thinks that prisons should aim at rehabilitation, then retaining the right to vote is essential; removing it is dehumanizing. By cutting offenders and ex-offenders out of political conversation, society loses out on the potential insight they could provide. Public policy would greatly benefit by involving those most affected by the social determinants of crime and those most familiar with the workings of both the criminal and restorative justice systems. Exclusion of prisoners’ and ex-offenders’ input results in a class of citizens who are subject to the rules and laws of the United States, but voiceless to how they are governed—not unlike “taxation without representation.”

Editor’s Note: Pennsylvania law allows for peo-

ple to vote as long as they are not actively serving a sentence for a felony. This means that if you are incarcerated pre-trial for a felony, you can vote, and people on probation and parole are eligible to vote as soon as they go home.

What's Good for Some is Not Good for the Gander

Jason Kollock of SCI Houtzdale

Everyday, at least once on each and every network, the media will run a story on either discrimination, oppression, racism, or the disadvantaged. However, those stories only tend to trend for what could cause outrage, discontent, and division within society. Well, those stories do not tend to trend the same way for us.

Long before social media and the internet, you were able to complete your prison sentence and your debt to society was considered paid. In today's day and age, this concept is no longer in existence. Now all anyone has to do is take a picture of you, and they learn every little thing about you. Criminal background checks used to be used for employment purposes; not for John Q Public to harass or intimidate.

Where are the media stories about those of us who, upon release, just want to make a fresh start and return to being productive members of society and face endless barriers?

We are the disadvantaged on so many levels. Our sentences are so long that when we leave prison it's like we are leaving a 3rd world country to enter into a technology advanced society. Then, we're told: "Figure it out." Another grim reality is that you're in prison so long that everyone you knew is gone.

A New Amendment for Prisoner Suffrage

Heath W. Gray of SCI Greene

“No taxation without representation!” was a rallying cry for our founding fathers which led to our Declaration of Independence along with our Revolutionary War with Great Britain. No taxation without representation is a fundamental principle of our society. All taxpaying American citizens must have a voice, and our voice is our vote.

States are denying over 2,000,000 taxpaying American citizens nationwide of their right of suffrage.

So, a request was sent out to our United States Senator John Fetterman asking him to introduce the following amendment to our federal Constitution:

Amendment XXVIII

The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of criminal convictions. Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.

Please write a letter, call or otherwise contact Senator Fetterman and let him know you support this initiative. If you believe it would be a boon to the work you do as advocates for prison and criminal justice reforms in accord with basic human dignity and our evolving standards of decency, let him know now.

It is time for over 2 million American citizens in our prisons to finally be able to cast a vote for fair and balanced lawmakers, prosecutors, judges, Governors, and every other politician over unfair and unbalanced get-tough-on-crime candidates who have put themselves above our rule of law to arbitrarily deny American prisoners their right of suffrage with devastating consequences from wrongfully convicting innocent folks like Walter Ogród who suffered on the row for over a quarter century before being exonerated with exculpatory DNA evidence to individuals like Marie Scott who didn't kill anyone but was still forced to suffer for over half a century in prison before being granted executive clemency.

If prisoner suffrage is ensured, there will be a righting of these wrongs, yes, such injustices and many others as well will be corrected. Be a part of American history.

Board of Pardons

Wayne C. Thomas of SCI Albion

Everyone must face the consequences of their actions. I expect it of you. You have an obligation to read about the pain that my imprisonment has caused.

On November 27, 2024, I will be sixty-six years old. The Board of Pardon's vote has been pending since 2020, which has taken a terrible toll on me and drove me through bouts of anxiety over the past four years. Waiting for the Board's decision has been excruciating.

Right now, you have deprived me from obtaining skills that I will need to rejoin society after prison. Upon my sentencing's minimum release date in 2026, I will be sixty-eight years old. Funds to sustain myself will be extremely limited to SSI. Even though I have job skills now that make me employable today, I can not contribute to renting a home or paying my share of personal income taxes because of this pending decision.

I worry about finding someone who will recognize the inhumanity of what I've gone through. Over the years, my health has deteriorated. I have hypertension and high cholesterol, along with asthma and diabetes. Occasionally, my high blood pressure gets worse, leaving me so light-headed that I have to sleep on the floor at bedtime. I have to take pills on a continuous basis to lower my risks for a stroke, heart attack, and the development of kidney and pancreatic diseases.

In Pennsylvania, the Department of Corrections spends nearly sixty-thousand dollars per inmate per year. That annual number exceeds one-hundred thousand dollars per inmate when regular medical attention is required. Over the next two more years, I will cost the state more than two-hundred thousands more dollars: a high cost to taxpayers for a man whose elderly age shows he is no threat to society.

Do I expect any of you to care? Yes. As a Pardon's Board, you are to demonstrate great foresight, wisdom, and mercy in each case that is brought before you. Yours is a triumph of the human spirit against terrible fear and redemption. You set an example for social reform and valued character.

Elder Abuse at SCI Mahanoy

Timothy X. Wright of SCI Mahanoy

Last July, I was sent here as an Incentive Base Transfer (IBT) in an effort to be closer to my region. I was told by my Unit Manager SCI Somerset to choose three institutions. I chose, in this order: SCI Chester, Coal Township, then Phoenix. I based all three of these choices on one factor: each facility had Units or Wings exclusively housing seniors, like myself, who have been incarcerated for decades.

Yet, I was sent here and told by those here that I did not have a choice. Yes, I could have refused to come here. However, according to DOC policy, I would have to wait two years before reapplying. So, I came not knowing what I was in store for.

Not only does SCI Mahanoy not have a wing or unit exclusively for older adults or seniors, we are actually abused as such in this facility. Seniors are being taken advantage of here at SCI Mahanoy. We are made to house with men younger than ourselves who eventually begin to take advantage of us physically because of our physical limitations. And when we complain, we are given another cellmate even more obtuse. The violence is so frequent that most of the older men can't even go in the yard to get air as they are afraid of the violence spilling over to them being in the wrong place at the wrong time. The only thing for us is a senior exercise class that meets once a week for forty five minutes. However, the class itself is cancelled at least three times a month. We are told either that we have too much time or are not close enough to our minimum to participate in the few programs available.

A man hung himself a short while ago because the last of his remaining family members had died. The note left behind stated short and sweet: "Why should I go on? No one is left but me." Nobody on his wing understood what he was going through. It didn't matter what he did to get here. Didn't he deserve to die with a bit of dignity?

SCI Mahanoy holds nothing for men like him and myself. There are institutions for senior men and those similarly situated like myself wherein we can be housed in such a way that would allow the last remaining years of our lives to be fruitful and with meaning. When asked if we would be willing to speak to the younger population to help curb the violence, we reply: "What for? What incentive do we have to get involved when we have nothing for ourselves but

heartache and pain?"

The level of abuse at this facility is monstrous, to say the least.

Thank you for reading my words.

Response to "Prison Monitoring"

James Hochschild of SCI Houtzdale

Iam writing in regards to the article "Prison Monitoring" by Leigh Owens in the May/June issue of Graterfriends.

I like the idea of attempting to modify Restrictive Housing Unit (RHU) procedures. However, the suggested items of eliminating punitive restrictions such as clothing, etc., and allowing normal property would not be possible. I know that I am playing the devil's advocate. But, remember how parents punish their children with similar restrictions to encourage self-discipline. Yes, we are adults. However, there are a lot of inmates who act immaturely as if they are children. Sometimes, psychological manipulation with punitive restrictions is necessary.

Thank you for your time and attention.

I'm Thankful for Walter's Freedom

Bert Hudson of SCI Greene

Walter Ogrod is just one of far too many wrongfully convicted innocent Pennsylvanians who have fortunately been exonerated with exculpatory evidence and set free. Walter endured suffering over a quarter-century behind bars before being completely cleared of all charges with DNA evidence and released.

Walter Ogrod is a mentally challenged Pennsylvania man who Philadelphia police coerced into confessing to a crime he didn't commit: the heinous rape and murder of a four-year-old girl. Put another way, one of our most vulnerable citizens was browbeaten, bullied, and victimized by police. Then, rather than condemning and correcting this egregious injustice, Pennsylvania prosecutors and judges condoned it by convicting Walter without even allowing for any DNA testing in dereliction of their sworn duties to uphold the laws of our Commonwealth and Constitutions in

conformity with the truth, justice, and egalitarianism of our great American Dream

If it weren't for the repeatedly-broadcast *Dateline* TV show about Walter's case, Governor Wolf's moratorium on capital punishment, and also the election of a fair District Attorney, Larry Krasner, in Philadelphia, Walter would have been murdered by the state. Pennsylvania police, prosecutors, and judges were hell-bent on achieving in Walter's case rather than the "justice for all" we have pledged for one another as fellow Americans. The fundamental fairness of justice should always trump finality. Sadly, however, there are other wrongfully convicted innocent individuals still suffering in our prisons sentenced to life or death without any realistic hope of relief because enough DNA evidence doesn't exist in their cases to be tested.

Death and life without the right to parole review sentences must be abolished because they result in innocent people unjustly suffering death behind bars along with the guilty. We are merely imperfect people with an imperfect system of justice, so it is impossible for us to avoid making such grave mistakes comparable to throwing babies out with their bath water.

Call for Old Issues of Graterfriends

For those of you new to Graterfriends over the last few years, the Graterfriends community has a history dating back to 1983 when Graterfriends was its own non-profit. We are working on a large archival project to track every submission written. Our Prison Society records only go back until 1998.

We are looking for issues prior to 1998 if any of our readers who are long time readers or authors have any copies. We can also return them to you if you only have 1 copy.

The Pat Your Back Column

Interview with Sydia Bagley

Davide Meade, Graterfriends Associate

David Meade (DM): Can you share a bit about your journey? What led you to where you are today?

Sydia Bagley (SB): I grew up in North Philly during one of the roughest eras for my community. Opportunity was scarce, and survival sometimes meant making choices I'm not proud of. I earned a reputation as a "trap queen," moving in a world where fast money and danger came hand in hand. But even at my lowest, I always had a vision for something bigger.

While incarcerated, I started mentoring women, helping them see that they could rewrite their stories, too. That's where my transformation really began. I realized my past didn't have to define me; it could prepare me.

Today, I'm a proud mother, a business owner, and a community activist. I run Sy's Palace, a soul food and breakfast spot that feeds the body, and Locked Down Love, a non-profit that feeds the spirit by supporting people coming home from prison. Everything I do now—from my businesses to my advocacy—is about turning pain into purpose and showing that redemption is real.

DM: What was the most challenging part of your time in federal custody? How did you cope with those challenges?

SB: One of the hardest parts of my time in federal custody wasn't the bars or the routines—it was the distance from the people I loved, especially my daughter. I was a mother trying to raise a child through phone calls and letters. We did homework over the phone, and I tried to stay present in her world, but nothing replaces being there physically. That emotional weight was heavy.

Another challenge was learning how to navigate a place where you have to be tough just to survive, but not so hard that you lose yourself. I saw women break under pressure, and I made a promise to myself that I wouldn't let that be me.

I coped by finding purpose. I wrote, I prayed, and I kept envisioning the life I wanted to build once I came home. Faith, sisterhood, and the belief that I still had more to give the world—that's what kept me standing.

DM: How did you discover your passion for culinary arts



while in prison?

SB: Honestly, my passion for cooking found me while I was inside. In prison, food becomes more than just something to eat—it's comfort, connection, and creativity all in one. We didn't have much to work with, but we made magic out of what we had. I started experimenting with commissary items—tuna, ramen, chips—and learned how to turn them into full meals.

But what really sparked my love for culinary arts was watching how food brought women together. No matter what our charges were or where we came from, when we cooked and shared a meal, the tension eased. It reminded us that we were still human.

I realized cooking was my therapy and my voice. Every dish told a story—about struggle, resilience, and love. When I came home, I wanted to turn that same energy into something bigger. That's how Sy's Palace was born—a place

where I could feed people's souls the same way cooking fed mine during those years.

DM: Can you tell us about your role in the film Trap Queens? What was that experience like for you?

SB: Being featured on BET's American Gangster: Trap Queens was a life-changing experience for me. At first, I was hesitant because I didn't want to glorify my past. But then I realized it was bigger than me—it was about telling the truth. I wanted people, especially young women coming up in environments like mine, to see the full picture: the hustle, the pain, the consequences, and ultimately, the redemption.

On set, it felt surreal to revisit parts of my life I had tried to bury. But sharing my story helped me reclaim it. It gave me a platform to show that transformation is possible—that a former trap queen can become a business owner, a mother, and a community leader.

DM: Can you tell us about the inspiration behind your seasoning blends? What makes them unique?

SB: The inspiration behind my seasoning blends comes straight from my roots—North Philly hustle, prison creativity, and soul food tradition. When I was incarcerated, we didn't have access to fresh herbs or fancy ingredients, so we learned how to make flavor out of almost nothing. That experience taught me the art of balance—how a little spice, a pinch of sweetness, or a hit of heat could turn struggle into something satisfying. Every mix represents survival, resilience, and culture. They're crafted to bring that “from the block to the table” energy—bold, soulful, and full of heart.

What makes them unique is that they're built from lived experience. These aren't factory formulas—they're flavors born from real stories, real women, and real kitchens where love was the main ingredient even when resources were limited.

DM: How has your restaurant impacted your community?

SB: Sy's Palace, sitting right there on 27th and Ridge, is more than just a restaurant—it's a movement. When I opened those doors, I wasn't just thinking about selling plates; I was thinking about changing energy in a place that's seen a lot of pain and struggle. That corner has history, and I wanted to bring life back to it—good food, good vibes, and a reminder that something positive can grow right in the heart of North Philly.

We feed people from all walks of life—single mothers, returning citizens, elders, and kids who just need a safe place to feel seen. We hire people who might not get a shot anywhere else, because I remember what it feels like to come home and have doors slammed in your face. Sy's Palace became that open door.

The impact has been deep. We've hosted community give-backs, fed the homeless, celebrated men and women who turned their lives around, and created jobs right in our own neighborhood. People don't just come for the food—they come for the feeling.

DM: What philanthropic initiatives are you most proud of? How do they align with your personal experiences?

SB: The philanthropic work I'm most proud of is through my nonprofit, Locked Down Love. It was born straight out of my own story—being incarcerated, coming home, and realizing how hard it is to rebuild your life with limited support. Locked Down Love is my way of giving back to the people who are still fighting their way out of that cycle.

Every year, we host events that honor men and women who've come home and turned their lives around. We provide resources, mentorship, clothing, and sometimes just a shoulder to lean on—because I know firsthand how much that means.

DM: In what ways do you hope to empower the youth in your community through your story and work?

SB: I want the youth in my community to look at my story and realize that their mistakes don't define them—the choices they make after, do. I've been where a lot of them are: searching for belonging, trying to survive, getting caught up in the fast life. But I also found out that there's power in slowing down, in believing you deserve more, and in building something real.

Through Sy's Palace, I show young people that entrepreneurship is possible—even if you've been counted out. Through Locked Down Love, I give them a space to see transformation up close. We bring in returning citizens, mentors, and community leaders who've walked that same rough road but turned it into a new beginning.

My goal is to teach them that their story can shift at any moment—that they can be the author of their next chapter. I want them to feel seen, heard, and capable of creating a future that looks nothing like their past. If my journey can spark even one young person to chase purpose instead of pain, then I've done my job.

DM: What advice would you give to someone who is facing adversity and looking to turn their life around?

SB: Advice for someone facing adversity: I'd tell them to first believe in themselves, even when it feels impossible. Life will test you, and people will count you out—but your story isn't over yet. Take ownership of your choices, learn from your mistakes, and surround yourself with people who lift you up instead of pulling you down. Find your purpose in what you love, even if it starts small, and let that guide you. Transformation is a process, not an overnight fix.

From the Society

Updates to Board of Pardons Clemency Application

Noelle Gambale

The Board of Pardons recently released an updated clemency application. The old applications will only be accepted through December 2025. If you have already mailed yours in, then you are still okay.

Request an Application By Mail:

You may request a new application from the Board of Pardons by mail. You must send the Board of Pardons the following information:

- Applicant name
- Mailing address to send the application
- Phone number (optional)
- Email address (optional)

The Board of Pardons address is:

PADOC/BSAAC/Division of Field Audits & Clemency Investigations
1920 Technology Parkway
Mechanicsburg, PA 17050

New Updates

- Easier to follow graphics
- Personal Statement is no longer an optional section - it is now required
- More emphasis on court debt needing to be paid off- this has become a larger factor in the Board's decisions
- More helpful guides in the case information section

Gulag: A History by Anne Applebaum

Review by Noah Barth, Prison Monitoring Director

This Pulitzer Prize winning history of the Soviet Union's concentration camp system is equal parts fascinating and horrifying. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the government's previous-

ly secret archives were slowly opened to outsiders. Applebaum's deep research and interviews with survivors has revealed for the first time the scope and nature of the prison labor system that imprisoned as many as 18 million citizens.

Applebaum reports in shocking detail how people were forced to work heavy labor 12-18 hours a day in arctic conditions while being fed starvation diets. People were made to cut trees, dig shipping canals, and mine coal and gold with only hand tools and no winter clothing. Workers who became too sick or injured to work were given smaller food portions which almost certainly led to death. While the total number of people who died in the gulags will never be known, researchers estimate the total to be at least one million. But overwork and starvation were not the only causes of death. Camp staff would periodically receive orders from the central government to kill a specific number of prisoners- often in the thousands.

The gulags came under the control of the secret police and while many people there were convicted of things we more typically think of as crime- theft, assault, etc.- the majority were there for so-called "political crimes." Speaking poorly of the government, reading western books, or membership in a banned organization could land you in the gulag, often with as little evidence as being accused by a neighbor. Exile was a parallel feature of the gulags with at least six million minority citizens forcibly displaced to Siberia and other far away places, and their ancestral homelands re-settled ethnic Russians.

With the death of Josef Stalin, the gulags were slowly dismantled until being fully abolished in 1960. At its peak in 1950 the gulags held 2.5 million people out of a total soviet population of 179 million. Compare that to American mass incarceration's peak in 2008, when we imprisoned 2.4 million people out of a total US population of 304 million. Added to the fact that gulags maintained their numbers despite hundreds of thousands of people dying inside of them every year, and we see the shocking scope of these concentration camps.

At 586 pages, Gulag is a long and at times slow read. Applebaum however does an impressive job of both creating a comprehensive history and telling in-

dividual stories so that we can understand the horror of the gulags. Hopefully enough people will read this work that we as a human race never repeat the worst crimes of the Soviet Union.



FAMM Legislative Update

Pennsylvania's General Assembly is still in session and still has not yet passed a budget, which was due on June 30, 2025. Due to the ongoing budget negotiations, many of FAMM's supported bills have not seen any movement over the summer, however we are hopeful that there will be some attention on these bills in the Fall. FAMM is working diligently to gain House support for HB 150, which would provide expanded access to medical release for incarcerated people with certain chronic or terminal medical conditions. Unfortunately, HB 150 has not yet passed out of the House despite the bipartisan support and sponsorship of this bill.

Additionally, HB 1550 was introduced, which would create options for access to age-based relief for incarcerated people aged 50 or older who have served half their minimum sentence or 25 years of incarceration, whichever is less. As we await the Pennsylvania Supreme Court's ruling regarding felony murder sentencing in Commonwealth v. Lee, FAMM is happy to support SB 387 and HB 443, which would allow parole eligibility after 25 years served for people convicted of felony murder.

FAMM is also excited to support HB 1506, which would make communications free for people incarcerated in Pennsylvania. Of interest to FAMM are also three House Resolutions that seek to humanize and better care for the people living in Pennsylvania's correctional facilities. HR 36 would commission a study on the quality of libraries in carceral facilities in Pennsylvania; HR 59 would designate November 1, 2025 as "State Correctional Institution Day" in Pennsylvania and encourage lawmakers to visit a state prison facility unannounced at least twice per year; and HR 189 would commission a study on the nutritional value of food served in Pennsylvania's State Correctional Institutions, as well as the nutrition-related health of people living in these facilities. FAMM also continues to monitor and oppose legislation containing mandatory sentences in Pennsylvania.

FAMM Advocacy Workshops

Are you interested in FAMM facilitating Storytelling and Legislative Advocacy workshops in your facility? Let us know by writing to FAMM attn: Advocacy, 1100 13th Street, Suite 201, Washington, D.C. 20005, or emailing advocacy@famm.org.

FAMMGRAM

FAMM is now mailing out quarterly FAMM-grams about our work in reform across the country. These free newsletters share valuable information for you and your friends and families on the outside. If you'd like to start receiving the FAMM-gram through the mail, please send your name, DOC number, facility name, and complete mailing address to: FAMM, 1100 13th Street, Suite 201, Washington, D.C. 20005. We'll be sending out the next issue in November.

Wellpath Bankruptcy

Pennsylvania Institutional Law Project (PILP)

You may have heard that Wellpath filed for bankruptcy last year. Wellpath is the company that provides medical care in the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections and a few county jails. Wellpath's bankruptcy case is now over. Wellpath's "re-organization plan" was approved by the bankruptcy court. This is a plan for how Wellpath will manage its debts. This includes the debts that it agrees to pay and how it will pay them, and also debts that Wellpath no longer has to pay (so that they are "discharged").

Wellpath continues to operate as it did before and still provides medical care in the DOC and elsewhere. Wellpath's bankruptcy will most likely impact lawsuits which were filed or will be filed against Wellpath or Wellpath employees about things that happened before November 11, 2024. If you have a lawsuit against Wellpath or its employees, and have questions about how Wellpath's bankruptcy filing impacts your case, you can write to: Pennsylvania Institutional Law Project, 718 Arch Street, Suite 304S, Philadelphia, PA 19106.

REQUESTS FOR RESOURCES

In lieu of a list, please request resources directly with this form. Please allow one month for a response.

Complete and mail to the Pennsylvania Prison Society:

Pennsylvania Prison Society

ATTN: Resources

230 South Broad Street, Suite 605

Philadelphia, PA, 19102

Name, ID Number, Facility

If Applicable: Returning County for Re-entry Resources

Resource Description

Note: The Prison Society does not offer financial assistance

Buses Are Back.



The Prison Society is providing low-cost rides for your loved ones from Philadelphia to four state correctional institutions: **SCI Benner, SCI Frackville, SCI Mahanoy, and SCI Muncy.**

Tell your loved ones to purchase tickets one of two ways:

- **Online:** Visit www.prisonsociety.org/services/transportation
- **In-person:** 230 S. Broad Street, Suite 605, Philadelphia, PA 19102
(Monday - Friday, 9 AM - 5 PM)
- **Call** our office at 215-564-4775.

STRATEGIC PLANNING SURVEY

The Prison Society is starting a community-wide visioning and strategic planning process. Your insights are important to shaping the next chapter of the Prison Society. Please complete and mail to the Pennsylvania Prison Society.

Where are you currently incarcerated?

How do you know about the Prison Society? (Check all that apply)

- I called the Prison Society Helpline
- A family member told me
- A volunteer visitor came to see me
- I used one of their programs
- I heard about them from staff
- I am not familiar with them
- Other (please specify):

What help from the Prison Society has been most useful to you?

How easy or hard is it to get help from the Prison Society?

- Very easy
- Somewhat easy
- Somewhat hard
- Very hard
- I haven't tried

On a scale of 1 - 10, how likely are you to recommend the Prison Society?

(1 = Not likely at all, 10 = Extremely likely)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

How old are you?

- Under 18
- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65+
- Prefer not to say

How long have you been incarcerated?

- Less than 1 year
- 1-3 years
- 4-6 years
- 7-10 years
- More than 10 years

What is your race or ethnicity?

- Black / African American
- White / Caucasian
- Hispanic / Latino
- Asian / Pacific Islander
- Native American / Indigenous
- Middle Eastern / North African
- Other:
- Prefer not to say

What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary / Third gender
- Prefer not to say

How long have you known about the Prison Society?

- Less than 6 months
- 6 months to 1 year
- 1-3 years
- More than 3 years
- I'm not sure

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Philadelphia, PA 19102

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(i.e. a \$10 check will be processed as a 3-year subscription and a \$1 donation).

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